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BALDY'S POINT

BY

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"OLD FULKERSON'S CLERK," "THE NEW MAN
AT ROSSMERE," "SCRUPLES," ETC.

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BALDY'S POINT.

CHAPTER I.

THE RECORD OF A DAY.

ONLY a rumor! a faint, awe-struck whisper, as illusive as the memory of a troubled dream, as intangible as the breeze that rustled in the restless leaves of the tall cottonwood trees that grew where they listed round about town; but it was potent to bring all the women and children of Baldy's Point together into anxious and excited conclave.

No one could tell who first set the horrible whisper afloat. Doubtless some bird of ill omen; for there were no mail packets in those days, breasting the fierce current of the swollen river as it rushed seaward with its annual spring tribute of ugly black drift-logs; there were no mounted couriers flashing into sight, with glitter of saber and jingle of spur, to drop the seed of weal or woe with hurried and indifferent hand; no newspapers, to keep tally with fate.

Nothing to link Baldy's Point with the outer world but a huge, sullen-looking gunboat doing sentinel duty out there amid the racing waters. It, on the one side; on the other a townful of women living through empty, objectless days waiting for that which never came.

Into this stagnation somebody dropped three thrilling words: "Lee has surrendered!"

The lips that repeated the fateful words trembled with the burden of them, and the ears that received them recoiled with pain. Women derive a mysterious sort of satisfaction from flat contradiction, quite as if the enunciation of a negative proved a negative.

It was simply not so. It could not be true, you know. They did not care in the least who said so; it was not so. They had prepared their minds for every possible contingency but that identical one. They hated the starter of this rumor with rabid but, in view of the difficulty of identifying him, necessarily impersonal animosity. Had they not given up their husbands and fathers and sons and lovers to ward off this very thing? (women argue from the heart.) Such sacrifices as they had cheerfully made could not possibly count for naught.

Having made sure, individually, by mere

force of reiteration, that there was absolutely nothing at all at the bottom of this absurd rumor, they rallied in force to discuss the probable effects of it upon the fortunes of Baldy's Point. They had long since worn that much-put-upon war aphorism, "Woe to the conquered," to a verbal skeleton, but it was hauled into service once more and its bones picked with gruesome deliberation in order to decide, if possible, what sort of woe might be in store for them collectively.

The bird of ill omen that sowed the seed of consternation in Baldy's Point that soft April day sowed it so industriously that before ten o'clock every woman who could possibly get away from her home duties was on the front gallery of Sellers's store.

Sellers's store had this sudden prominence thrust upon it because somebody had discovered a travel-worn freedman sound asleep on one of the dusty, much-bewhittled benches that stood on its gallery. Of course, this must be the bird of ill omen.

Truth to state, as he lay there with an old gunny-sack folded under his head for a pillow, with a dingy bandanna handkerchief covering all of his face but a yawning mouth, into whose cavernous recesses flies of adventurous spirit made frequent incursions with impunity; with

his huge, upturned feet escaping from the inadequate shelter of a pair of army boots, the ornithologist would either have repudiated him utterly or labeled him—"Jail-bird."

He was still asleep when Mrs. Sellers, the first to arrive, stepped up on the low gallery by aid of an inverted dry-goods box at the yard end of the store. The Sellers lived just back of the store, in the prettiest cottage at Baldy's Point. "Sellers's," standing as it did just where the river road, and the "back-country" road met in Baldy's Point, was a favorite lounging-place for wayfarers. Nobody knew where this particular wayfarer hailed from.

Mrs. Sellers did not attempt to arouse him. He looked formidable.

She preferred waiting for reinforcements, regarding him, in the mean while, from a safe distance, with the cautious concern one bestows upon an infernal machine presumably loaded with death.

There was nothing doing in Sellers's store. Over the slumberer's head hung a pretentious and misleading sign "J. Sellers, General Merchandise and Forwarding Merchant," but for nearly two years now the general merchandise had been reduced to a lot of hardware under one of the counters, which nobody could find use for, and, being rather too cumbersome

for stealing, it had offered no temptation to transgressors. The dingy green wooden shutters, the bolting of which Mr. Sellers himself used to see to every night, had been burned for kindling-wood ever so long ago, and the "forwarding" business was carried on exclusively by the rats between the deserted grocery department and their own abodes. The doors stood open day and night, and Mrs. Sellers could see from where she stood a starveling cow walk boldly up on the back gallery to nose about the spot where the bales of timothy hay, that were bought up North somewhere, used to be piled. Who will say the beasts of the field have no memory! She was quite sure there had been no hay in that back gallery since that cow's early calthood. Perhaps if this man's horrible rumor should prove true, Mr. Sellers would soon be at home again, and the store be restocked, and—she pulled imagination up with a jerk: was she really predicting pleasant possibilities on the prospect of Lee's surrender? She blushed hotly at the enormity of her own wickedness, and was glad there were no more visible signs of it than her consciously pink cheeks when Mrs. Davidson joined her, looking anxious and white and plucking wildly at little, close-clinging fragments of dough which ornamented her hands.

Mrs. Davidson was portly, and she panted as she mounted to the gallery, talking as she plucked at the dough: "I didn't even wait to take my pantry apron off. You know since Amy went to the Yankees I have every bit of my own light bread to make. We would all die of indigestion if I didn't. Who says Lee has surrendered? Perfectly preposterous, you know!"

"Nobody can find out unless it's this darky, and I believe he's going to sleep forever." The new word "freedman" was too clumsy for Mrs. Sellers's untrained tongue. "Suppose we wake him now," she added, tentatively. There is strength in numbers.

Mrs. Davidson approving, a lively and prolonged fusillade of "Uncle! oh, uncle! o-h—uncle!" was poured into both of the slumberer's ears simultaneously, without the slightest effect.

Mrs. Randolph Baker arrived at this juncture, and, with her usual readiness in expedients, said, "Shake him."

She had her knitting in her fair hands, and the shining needles continued clicking, whatever she did. If gray yarn and knitting-needles could have saved the lost cause, Mrs. Randolph Baker alone would have been worth ten thousand men. The town statistician essayed to keep account of the socks and woollen comforters she made, but gave up the onerous task

at the end of the first year of the war. Mrs. Baker was Judge Baker's wife. She used to set the fashions for Baldy's Point before the war, and people had gotten into the habit of looking up to her as good authority on other subjects than dress; that is the reason why, when she said, with that soft, sweet drawl of hers, "Shake him," Mrs. Sellers and Mrs. Davidson immediately cast about for a clean enough spot on the shoulders of the sleeping monster to seize him by. It was an undertaking that called for discrimination. Fortunately, he saved them the trouble by suddenly opening his eyes to the peril of the situation and sitting bolt upright, to glare at the rapidly increasing group of women about him with an expression of bewilderment bordering on terror.

They were all there, in fact, by the time the man was well awake. Mrs. McCutchen, who had sent three splendid boys to the army in Virginia—who had more cause for anxiety than she? She brought the baby along with her. And little Miss Mildred Miller, whose front hair had turned gray, since restoratives had been unprocurable, and contrasted violently with the brown braid on the back of the head; and the widow Barton, for whom the war had already done its very worst; and sweet-voiced, bright-eyed Fanny Ray. Ah! she was not patriotic.

She thought it all monstrous. The other women viewed her with severe disfavor.

Each one had her own way of questioning the man on the bench. He was a stranger; the only person in the whole town whose presence could not be satisfactorily accounted for. Hence he must be the one who had brought the news of Lee's surrender. But though they outnumbered him twenty-five to one; though they exhorted, implored, defied, and badgered him with all the ingenuity known to the sex, they could extract nothing from him but the stolid declaration that he "hadn't come no furdur'n Watson's place, back on de bayer, en was jus' sleepin' off de time till he could git t' see ef Mrs. Sellers didn' want her spring gyardin' spade up."

After making this statement almost as many times as there were women to hear it, he got up stolidly and walked away from them. Who then?

The heavy dews of the morning had long since dried off the grass-grown levee that stretched greenly along the front of the town. The sun had mounted above the tops of the trees that sheltered the Sellers cottage from sight of the store, and still the women lingered, restless, nervous, unsatisfied. From sheer force of habit their eyes would turn toward the levee

and their gaze be strained toward the distant bend where it turned abruptly to accommodate itself to the curve in the river. Vicksburg was in that direction, and if anything more authentic than this unplaceable rumor was to come to them that day, it must come from that point.

It grew hot on the gallery, and Mrs. Sellers's hospitality led the way into the great, dusty, empty store. It was uncheerful in there. The post-office box, with its empty pigeon-holes, adorned with the written names of so many who had gone away never to come back again, stared them in the face from one end of the counter, and stirred up melancholy lines of reflection. The dusty glass show-cases, with nothing inside to show, were such sharp reminders of numberless deprivations!—and how much bitterer defeat would make it all!

It was Fanny Ray, whose young eyes had been trained to discern objects at long range since her lover had gone to the war, who brought them all back to the gallery in fresh excitement: There was a man coming down the levee! She was sure it was a soldier, for he had a soldier's cap on, and a canteen was swinging across his shoulders.

A score of eyes followed the direction of her index finger. They mocked at her for presuming to see so much at such a distance.

One saw only a mule, browsing on the short, sweet grass of the levee. Another saw the black stump of a tree that had deceived her countless times before. Others saw—nothing at all. And even while they argued it, man and canteen and soldier cap all slowly materialized before the eyes of the most skeptical, and they held their breath while, with steps that were each one taken with pain and difficulty, he came toward them slowly—so slowly that the fierce impatience that was consuming them threatened to break all bounds.

It was but the wreck of a man who finally stood before them doffing the wreck of a gray hat to them with pathetic courtesy. The feet that had brought him toward them at such a laggard's pace were red and swollen and shoeless. The gray trousers that flapped in frayed fringes about his ankles were scarcely more than unseemly rags. A beard of many months growth hid the extreme hollowness of his cheeks. His eyes glowed with the fires of fever, and their expression was one of absolute despair.

Mrs. Randolph Baker, peering at him keenly over the rim of her spectacles as he limped toward them, said, in a low voice: "I do believe that's Henry White."

It was Fanny Ray who turned upon her in hot indignation: "Henry White! I should hate him

if he came home looking like that. He could not look like this *thing!*" Her eyes flashed, her voice, high-pitched in a key of resentment, went further than Mrs. Baker's, found a mark, and inflicted its wound.

The burning spot on the man's hollow cheeks burned more redly. For a second his eyes were raised in wistful survey of the fresh young face and glowing eyes of the girl who was even then mentally contrasting him with the erect young soldier whose full, beardless face, simply adorned with a sweeping mustache over the upper lip, and whose laughing eyes, as preserved in the photograph before which she had even that morning laid her votive offering of blue and white violets, belonged to the Henry White of her adoration—then were dropped upon his swollen, shoeless feet in an attitude of self-abasement.

No greeting! no waste of polite conventionalities. They did not even give him time to reach the dusty bench that offered the extreme luxury to his worn-out frame, before, in their cruel haste, they hurled the question at him:

"Has Lee surrendered?"

"Yes."

He said it doggedly, sullenly, indifferently if you will. He had endured all he could endure. He had exhausted all his emotions. No, not

all. A flush of indignation mounted high into his sunken temples as the tortured incredulity of the women found heartless expression: "He was a deserter." "He was a traitor." "He said 'yes' because he wanted it to be true." "He had been skulking in the woods until he did not know what the army was doing." "It was not so." "How would he prove it to them?"

Then he stood up on the gallery in their midst and pointed with a long, thin, sunburned finger toward the river. His arm and finger trembled, either from weakness or emotion, as he held it outstretched. He did not look at them. They were women; excited, unhappy, nervous women. It was hard, though, not to rail out at them for their cruel words. His burning eyes were fastened on a black hulk far away, out in the middle of the river.

"If it is true, the gunboat out yonder will fire twenty guns at sunset. If it is not true, you will know it then, and you will know, too, that you were right in calling me 'deserter' and 'traitor.' Will any one of you tell me where I can get a drink of water?"

"Come with me," said Mrs. Sellers, in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper, and she passed out through the back door of the store, with him limping slowly after her.

It was the signal for a general home-going. There was nothing to keep them any longer on the front gallery of Sellers's store. They parted silently. Not even yet would they admit it in words. How long it would be before sunset! How should they fill up the awful hours between? How readjust their lives to the new conditions? How substitute despair for hope without an outcry against Infinite Justice?

Fanny Ray wasted no time in such vain speculations. The war was over—perhaps—and Henry would soon be coming home. She would carry the wonderful news to others. There were lonely women waiting and watching for tidings all around and about Baldy's Point. It took her scarcely longer to have her fleet little mare saddled, to mount it, and start on her errand of enlightenment, than it took Mrs. Sellers to ensconce the tired man who brought the great news to them in a comfortable arm-chair, while she went about getting him a lunch-eon ready in remorseful haste.

How brightly the sun shone, in spite of it all! What a riot of sweet sounds the birds were making there in the woods, twittering and yodling and nest-making and mate-hunting! How springy the newly clothed sod under her horse's hoofs! What a waste of sweet scents

from the dogwood trees that shed their snowy bloom on the graves of last year's leaves! What a heartless trifler Nature must be to revel so in brightness and bloom at such a tremendous crisis! The fish were springing up, out there in the blue water of the lake, that lay miles inland from Baldy's Point, in wanton excess of sportiveness. All the sounds and sights and scents of a fresh spring day enveloped her. She saw three men fishing. She could hear their careless laughter long before she came in sight of them, for the button-willows and sassafras bushes grew close down to the water's edge. She knew who it was: old Colonel Mason, and Jack Mason with his friend. The two young men were home on sick furlough. She reined in her horse to send a thunderbolt hurtling into their midst:

"Lee has surrendered!"

To her horror she heard a fervent "Thank God!" and saw an old man's head bared reverently in prayer. Then she remembered how stubbornly old Colonel Mason had contended for the hopelessness of their cause, and how much bitter invective had been hurled at his reverend white head therefor. She, too, had hated him before this, but as she sped forward she found the echo to that "thank God" bubbling up from her own heart to her lips. The

war was over—Henry would come back—thank God!

She was going even then to carry the news to Henry's mother. Together they would watch the sun go down that night. Together they would endure the suspense of waiting for those fateful guns. She was glad when the day showed signs of growing old; glad when the sun sank on a level with the locust trees in the front yard of the house where she sat side by side with Henry White's mother, their hands clasped, their hearts beating tumultuously! glad when it sank yet lower, tinging the pure white blossom clusters of the locusts with a touch of pale gold by way of parting benediction; glad when the shadows grew long on the eastern side of the rosebushes that were bending beneath their weights of close-folded buds; glad that the hours of suspense were almost spent.

It came at last—the first gun. The touch of gold faded from the locust blossoms, leaving them pallid and cold. Perhaps it was only the sunset gun, after all. It woke the echoes every evening. Another. The two women saw each other's faces dimly through a mist of tears. The war had been no far-away, martial abstraction to them. Their hearts were torn with conflicting emotions. Another. The cup must

be drained. Defeat was bitter. Again and again, reverberating, remorseless, striking heavily on quivering heart-strings, until the twentieth gun was fired and—the end had come.

In the solemn hush that followed upon that last report the soft click of an upraised latch was audible, and there, limping slowly toward them, weary and worn, was—that "*thing!*"

CHAPTER II.

A GIRL'S FREAK.

FOUR or five miles still further back than the White place was old Major Wilson's Cedargrove plantation. The far-reaching reverberations of those twenty guns came to his ears and set him wondering. There was no one to tell him what it meant. He clutched the arms of the big chair where he sat in maimed helplessness with a fierce grip. For a year now, he had been what he himself called a "useless hulk." Like poor Ben Battle, of immortal renown, a cannon-ball having taken off his legs, he had laid down his arms. How he would like to order his horse saddled that moment and gallop in to Baldy's Point to find out what those twenty guns meant! What account would he or old Commodore have made of the twelve intervening miles of rough country roads. He struck the floor savagely with the clumsy wooden crutches that had taken Commodore's place so far as any locomotion was concerned. In that maimed and help-

less body the fires of a dauntless spirit burned rebelliously. He had never been baffled in all his life before that sudden, swift-rushing ball had come on an errand less merciful than death.

A girl's head was suddenly framed in the open window behind his back "Did you thump for me, father?"

"Did I thump at all?" the Major asked, turning his head over his shoulder to look at her. "It was just a sort of wooden expletive, I suppose. Did you hear the guns, Amy?"

"What guns?"

"Upon my honor, girl—"

"I was turning my palmetto over in the back room"—Amy hurried to offer her apology; there seemed a perpetual demand for apologies in those days— "and you know what a rustling it makes. I reckon that's the reason I didn't hear them."

"You'll turn to a palmetto bush some of these days," the Major said fretfully. "Bring me my pipe, child, will you?"

"They sell well," Amy answered, turning toward the interior, and reappearing presently on the front gallery with the tobacco caddy and her father's brierwood pipe. "I have an order for two more hats after this one is done."

"Who from?"

"Deacon Saunders and Elder Purly," she laughed into his troubled face, and held a lighted match so close to the grizzled mustache that the Major threw his head back violently.

"Confound it, child, to set fire to my nose! There are some things a woman never can learn how to do. I hope you find your nigger patrons good pay. It's all infernal nonsense, your plaiting palmetto hats for every woolly head in the quarters. If you were to sift the plantation in a lime sieve, you couldn't find five dollars cash."

"And couldn't use it if I did," Amy said lightly, but a tired look came over her sweet face. She did not propose to argue it all over again with him. She never had let him know how largely her distasteful work contributed to his own comfort in those moneyless, meager days. She stayed to see his pipe comfortably aright, and then went back into the room where her long coil of plaited palmetto lay, with its unplaited ends in the basin of water by her chair. She would rather take her work out on the front gallery and sit with her father, but the sight of it seemed always to irritate him. She was learning to adjust her life to his whims. Perhaps, some of these days, when he had become more used to his helplessness, he would be less irritable. She worked on indus-

triously until it grew too dark to piece the ends of the tiny strips of palmetto nicely, then she went out, taking her low, armless rocker with her, and sat down quite close to his side. He put out a large hand and laid it on her head caressingly. It was his way of apologizing for having been harsh with her.

It grew dark soon on the Cedargrove gallery. The yard was choked with foliage. No one had paid any attention to trimming or pruning for over three years now, and the house sat low on the ground. A fitful breeze sifted through the heavy foliage of the prides-of-China that stood in a solid phalanx along the front of the yard fence. It was their blossom-tide, and the purple clusters that swayed from every twig scented the air with cloying fragrance. Wherever the china trees were not, in the big front yard, dark, conical cedars were; and a partial April shower that had scarcely passed beyond the limits of the Cedargrove plantation had sprinkled them and brought out all their resinous sweetness. Thousands of fireflies flitted in and out among their dark branches, with a celerity that multiplied them into a shower of stars.

"That would be a pretty sight to a stranger," said Amy, by way of making talk.

"And that," the Major, answered with quer-

lous inconsequence, as a full orchestral strain arose from the throats of myriad frogs in the horse-pond.

Amy laughed hopelessly. She had no apology ready for the frogs. There was a loose plank immediately under her chair which creaked responsively to every pressure of the rockers, but the frogs and that creaking plank were practiced in concert, and excited no comment. The Major's mind had gone back to those unexplained guns. Old Bose, the Major's hound, came softly pattering through the hall, and lay down at his master's feet with a sigh of resignation. He had been prospecting around the kitchen door with a view to finding out when supper would be ready. The Cedargrove cook was lacking in that punctuality which Bose considered a prerequisite to happiness in this world. A badly broken and sunken brick walk led by a strait and narrow way between two close-set rows of dark cedars from the front gate to the gallery where the Major spent the most of his life now. The sound of a hand on the iron latch of the picket gate at the end of this walk made Bose stir restlessly at the Major's feet, and lift his head drowsily to send a semi-hostile growl in the direction of the sound. The front door was open, and the candle that stood on the table in the hall sent a band of

feeble light out into the obscurity of the yard. Within this band of light presently the advancing figure stood fully revealed. He was young, and looked the athlete he was. From the amount of mud that was spattered up to the very top of his boots, which were worn outside his blue cottonade trousers, it was evident he had ridden far and hard.

"The substitute!" It was Amy who muttered these two words, with an infinite amount of scorn, and suddenly vacated her chair, slipping around the darkest corner of the house so he might not be witness of her flight.

The veranda ran around three sides of the house, and all the windows were open to the floor, so she had no difficulty in getting inside, where she groped her way to a seat near one of the front windows. She had caught some words as she turned the corner of the house, which made her eager to hear more, but as she never had been able to treat this obnoxious young man with any civility since he had gone into the army as a paid substitute for another man, been taken prisoner, and finally sent home paroled (some even whispered he had taken the oath), she preferred listening to him from the shelter of the sitting-room curtains.

Before he was well up on the gallery she had

heard him ask her father excitedly, "Have you heard the news?"

The Major leaned forward with breathless eagerness to say, "No—what?"

"Lee has surrendered." Unasked, the young man flung himself heavily down in the little rocker Amy had just vacated. He breathed hard and excitedly, and took off his hat to mop his forehead.

"Who says so, sir?" It was the roar of a wounded animal rather than the question of an eager man.

"Henry White."

Amy never knew exactly how she happened to find herself back on the front gallery leaning over her father's chair, supporting her trembling form by pressing both hands hard down on his strong shoulders.

The light from the feeble candle (her own make from beef tallow molded in pieces of cane root) fell full on the substitute's face. It was not a mean face, as by rights it should have been if half the things said about Cap Van Dorn were true; on the contrary, he carried his well-shaped head rather defiantly, and the eyes that left the Major's stormy face to revel in the grace of Amy's attitude as she leaned over the old man's chair were frank and fearless and bright.

"Henry White," he repeated; "poor fellow!"

"What's the matter with him?" The Major asked the question contemptuously, as if Henry White's personal sufferings were a matter almost too slight for comment in view of the greater and more general disaster of Lee's surrender.

"Poor fellow! I guess he's just got home in time to die."

"Can't you find a chair, child?" the Major said, moving restlessly under Amy's leaning weight. "Your hands are hot and heavy."

"Ten thousand pardons!" said Cap, springing nimbly to his feet. "I was so absorbed by my news that I forgot my manners."

"Keep your chair, Mr. Van Dorn; I will bring a chair." Her voice was scarcely more than a husky whisper. She glided past him and into the house, where she crouched down in the gloom and listened for what was to come.

The substitute resumed his seat and his narrative:

"Well, you see, I rode into Baldy's Point after dinner to see if I could pick up any news, and I tell you things were stirred up there. Every soul I met wanted to tell me the same story over: How a whisper of the surrender had got out this morning nobody knew from where, though they've since found out

that it came from old man Ben Dicks, Mrs. Randolph Baker's carriage-driver he used to be, who was out at the gunboat last night trading lettuce and radishes for flour and tobacco, but he was afraid at first to own up to it; and how finally Henry White limped into town just about done up—it seems he was discharged from the hospital at Vicksburg and turned adrift; and how the women all pounced down on him and abused him like all wrath when he said it was true, and how none of them recognized him for Henry White—small wonder, for he looks about as much like he used to as I look like that hound there at your feet, and how he wouldn't give up his name at first because he caught Miss Fanny Ray's words when she said she'd hate him if he came home looking like that thing; and how Mrs. Sellers took him over to her house and gave him some lunch and made him rest, and how he told her first one who he was, and how hard she tried to find some sort of beast to send him out home on, and finally found a mule for him, and all the women—”

“Confound Mrs. Sellers and the mule and the rest of the women!” the Major broke in, tempestuously. “I want to hear about Lee and the surrender.”

Cap Van Dorn had his own reasons for being

very patient with this irate veteran, over and beyond the chivalric pity he felt for the man who had been so suddenly stricken down from a position of power and authority to that of a helpless cumberer of the earth. He was Amy's father!

"I am afraid, Major," he answered, unresentfully, "you'll have to send for Henry White if you want to hear anything more. I've about told you all I know."

"I'll do it, sir. Amy!"

Amy got up from her crouching posture and fled toward the rear of the house. She would not hear him yet awhile.

"Amy!"

There was no use affecting deafness any longer. She reluctantly retraced her steps toward the two men.

"Here I am, father."

"Hurry up supper, can't you, while I write a note to Henry White. You'll take it, Van Dorn. I'll send Commodore over there for him after breakfast to-morrow. If he's the boy he used to be, he won't mind riding three or four miles to accommodate a helpless old hulk like me."

"But, father, he's not the man he used to be," Amy began in a protesting voice, wishing from her heart Fate had never put it into Cap Van

Dorn's heart that night to come to Cedargrove with this disturbing news.

But the Major had struggled to his feet and on to his crutches, and stumped past her to the little ink-stained writing-desk that stood in the hall, and began his note with energetic determination before she could think of any other objection to offer.

And then the supper-bell rang, and she had to invite the substitute in to their Confederate meal of corn-meal muffins and fried pork and sassafras tea without any sugar in it, and as soon as decency would permit after it, the Major, consumed with a frenzied hunger for more news, had thrust his note into the young man's hand and urged him to deliver it at Henry White's door before he slept, and so there was no help for it.

Her cheeks burned and her eyes flashed that night as she thought of her father's impetuosity.

"He'll think we are selfish brutes—and he engaged to Fanny Ray!"

The two clauses of her sentence had no visible connection with each other.

CHAPTER III.

MORE CRUELTY.

FANNY RAY, turning her startled glance away from the figure all tattered and torn that came slowly limping toward the gallery where she and Henry White's mother sat comforting each other with mute caresses for the first bitterness of defeat, saw something in her companion's face that brought her to her feet with a cry of pain and resentment.

Mrs. White had suddenly withdrawn the hand that had been laid soothingly about her shoulders, and, encircling her brow with it to aid the failing sight of old age, was scanning the advancing figure curiously. As the girl looked at her she saw curiosity merge itself into wonder, wonder into half-skeptical recognition, then the great light of a mother's deathless love dawned slowly in the faded blue eyes, and illumined her whole face. She half rose to her feet, only to fall back trembling.

"Mother, don't you know me either?" It came in a wail from the lips of the wreck as he reached the foot of the front steps and stood

there irresolutely, with hands stretched pleadingly toward the elder woman. He would not even look at the younger one, but his hands dropped heavily to his sides as she sprang passionately to her feet in impetuous protest against this cruel shattering of her beautiful day-dream.

"It isn't Henry! It can't be Henry! It shan't be! He had better have died! Ten thousand times better!" With her hands clasped to her face, resolutely determined not to see in this poor vagabond the stately young lover she had been so proud of, she turned and fled, and at the second when the mother's arms enfolded him in all his unsightly rags, holding him close to her rejoicing heart, a door in the upper hall of the house slammed violently, so violently that the physically worn man trembled at the loud vibration as he had never trembled at the whistling of bullet or the shrieking of shell.

More than an hour of almost wordless communion had passed between mother and son when Mrs. White, caressing his long brown beard with a trembling hand, said gently:

"Fanny did not recognize you, dear; small wonder, this changes you so very much. I must look up some of your old finery. I've had a time keeping the moths out of your clothes,

I can tell you. Tobacco became too costly, and we couldn't get camphor for love or money. Your Scotch tweeds are in a wonderful state of preservation. They used to fit you beautifully, too." The tears slowly welled into her gentle blue eyes as they wandered over the shrunken limbs and stooping shoulders of her boy, but she did not let them fall. Her voice was quite cheerful as she added: "And after you're shaved, and gotten into civilian's clothes, we'll have a good laugh at Fanny for not knowing you. I'll tell Ailsy to keep supper waiting."

"Let her alone!"

He said it so sternly that Mrs. White, who had gotten up to go to see about the Scotch tweeds and the supper, sat down again suddenly.

"Leave who alone—Ailsy?"

"No—Fanny Ray. Leave her where she is, mother; we do not—need her."

He said it very bitterly, but very firmly, turning his eyes away from his mother's searching gaze. It troubled him, even though the shades of night were fast gathering about them where they sat, just where the two women had sat and listened to the twenty guns at sunset. "As for the Scotch tweeds and the supper, that's all right, and the quicker I get into them the better Ailsy will be pleased, I reckon. If I remember, she was never noted for patience.

But I insist that you don't disturb Fan—Miss Ray."

He got up to go to his own room. His mother, moving by his side said, tremulously :

"One question, Henry. No other woman—" She trembled at the anticipation of some stranger, some girl she knew nothing of, coming there to take the place she had yielded up unwillingly even to Fanny Ray, although she had known Fanny from the cradle up.

"No, mother. There's no other woman involved. All through the war your image and hers have been my inspiration and my solace. Long after I was convinced of the hopelessness of things, I've looked forward to being comforted for every loss and all the humiliation of it by you and by her. I'm afraid in my thoughts it was always her and then you. Forgive me, dear, if I'm a trifle shaken by it. I've pitied the fellows who had no mother and no sweetheart to go back to. But it will all come right soon enough, I reckon. At any rate, mother, I've got you, and you've got me," and he halted there in the hall to give her a supplementary kiss.

"Fanny is devoted to you, son," his mother said magnanimously.

"Was."

"The day never passes that she don't wreathe

that photograph you had taken for her with fresh flowers."

"She has been doing homage to a memory."

"Oh, but, dear, you'll soon be the same old Henry."

"I hope not, mother. Indeed, if I have any will power left in me I will not."

"Henry! I don't in the least understand you."

"Perhaps not, dear: you will later on. I believe I'm too tired for a lengthy discussion of anything to-night. If you'll lay out the tweeds I'll join you again after I've made myself decent."

She turned and left him in his own bedroom, after laying the tweeds to his hand. Nothing in the room had been altered since that morning when he had ridden away looking so gay and bright and confident in his new gray uniform. No one but herself had ever gone in there, excepting, once or twice, Fanny Ray, "just to have a good cry all by herself." Poor Fanny! she would like to go to her now and comfort her for her disappointment. But Henry had looked so very stern when he said, "Leave her alone," that she really thought it best to obey him. Henry had always been a trifle masterful, and she did not mean to cross him on this the very first night he was at home. So,

instead of turning upstairs to the room Fanny always occupied when she came out to the plantation, she went toward the back door, and groped her way down the steps to the kitchen, which set out in the yard quite a little way.

Three years before, she would have rung the little hand-bell that set on the sideboard in the dining-room, for her cook to come to her for orders. But things had changed considerably in three years, and as Ailsy was very old, and not particularly good-tempered at the best, policy dictated her going down the back steps and across the yard to where Ailsy sat in the kitchen door smoking a very highly flavored pipe, by way of solacing herself for the late hour to which supper was being kept.

"What have you for supper, anyhow, Ailsy?" Mrs. White asked in a conciliatory voice, peering over her cook's shoulders toward the spot where a red glow located the kitchen stove.

"De same ole sev'n en six," Ailsy answered, rising stiffly from the door-sill to knock the ashes from her pipe. "Whar I gwine git enny fattnin' calf fur de progigal son on dis short notus?"

Ailsy had been around to the front gallery and greeted the returned soldier as cordially as was compatible with the fact that he was a "reb solger" and she was a free lady.

"I'se got some okry coffee, en some homly, en some corn dudgers. En them es thinks dey kin beat ole Ailsy at mekin 'uv corn dudgers is welcome t' try."

"We couldn't add a few scrambled eggs, I suppose?" Mrs. White suggested, persuasively.

"We could, I 'spose, ef der were any eggs t' scramble, but dey aint nary egg in dat safe, an' I 'lows I ain' gwine to dat hen-house to git bit by no rattlesnake nor mocsun nuther, dis time er night—not fur Mars Abe Linkum hisseff."

Mrs. White disappeared noiselessly. The grass and weeds in the back yard had been running riot for months. There was no one to mow them down for her. Ailsy's fear of rattlesnakes and moccasins was by no means groundless. The poultry yard afforded them excellent foraging ground. But if there were any eggs beyond those rank weeds and matted grass, they should be on the table by the time Henry was ready to sit down to it. Provided with the lantern she had taken from the kitchen table, she sped with the swiftness of a girl across the absurdly capacious yard. The grass was wet, and her feet were only protected by a pair of cloth shoes which she had made for herself, stitching the new, clumsy "uppers" on to a pair of old soles, and there was the possibility of snakes, that lent extra swiftness to her

motions. She returned soon in triumph, and laid the eggs before Ailsy, who looked from them to her somewhat superciliously:

"Well, I 'lows you is in a hurry to spoil dat boy. He do look like he need fat'nin' up, doa, 'sho. Dat w'at he git fer fightin' 'ginst Mars Abe Linkum."

"Never mind that now, Ailsy," said Mrs. White quickly—she had nearly reached the limits of endurance; "just see that the supper comes in hot, such as it is." Then, after giving very minute directions for to-morrow's breakfast, she hurried back to the dining-room, to make the best of a poor matter there. She looked at the meager appointments of the table ruefully. It was furnished forth with odds and ends. Everything had given out or been broken or stolen since Henry went away, and she hadn't cared at all for it up to that moment.

"So fastidious as he used to be, too!" she said aloud, disgustedly turning the cracked edge of a saucer away from the door so it shouldn't be the first sight his eye rested on when he entered the dining-room.

"I've had all that sort of nonsense knocked out of me, mother," he said, very close behind her, "and it's luxury just to be under the old roof once more."

"You won't think so when it gets to raining. The roof leaks awfully, son. But it is nice to have you back in your old place. I hope you'll be able to eat our rough fare. I hear Mrs. Davidson has biscuit and light bread whenever she wants them, but goodness only knows how she gets the flour. Some people say she trades with the gunboat, gets old 'Manuel to carry out butter and eggs in his own name to trade it for flour and coffee, but I would hate to think it was true. I'd rather eat my bolted corn-meal and burnt okra coffee forever than to trade with the enemy. You were always so fond of waffles, too. I came near forgetting myself a little while back and telling Ailsy she must have waffles for your breakfast. Dear me, if I only could set the table I used to!"

He had come in very softly. He was dressed in the old Scotch tweeds and luxuriating in slippers which made him feel quite like a prince in the matter of habiliment. His mother, hovering over the meager suppertable, anxious to make the best of everything for his sake, looking so much older and grayer than when he had gone away from home, now as ever self-oblivious and lamenting over his enforced participation of the hardships that had been her daily portion for years, assumed the proportions of a heroine in his eyes, and

before he seated himself at the table he folded her once again in his arms.

"Darling mother, thank God I've come back to one heroine! Thank God, you, at least, if you have changed, have only become a truer, grander, more adorable woman."

"You ridiculous boy! me an adorable woman? Fanny'll be jealous. She's very fond of you, dear; indeed she is. Now I'll tell Ailsy we're quite ready for her."

His face had clouded stormily at mention of Fanny's name, and he moved away from her side silently, to take his place at table. He was sick at heart. This was not the home-coming he had been picturing to himself for many months. He heard, without heeding, his mother's plaintive complaint over Ailsy's tardiness in bringing him up the poor supper. He saw, without sympathy, her look of discontent as the muddy stream of okra coffee flowed sluggishly from the spout of the coffee-pot. How trifling all these little domestic affairs seemed just then! He remembered with shame the importance he had once attached to a muddy cup of coffee. What a worthless sybarite he had been in those days of luxury and leisure!

"You know, son," Mrs. White said plaintively, "we haven't seen a grain of real coffee in two years. I'm quite sure you can't drink this

stuff." She came over from the head of the table to put his cup down by his plate. Then she sat down by his side. The length of the table was too much space between them.

He swallowed the hot mixture heroically. "It's ambrosia—nothing short of it, mamma!" He laughed, laughed into her anxious eyes for her sake. How strangely it sounded to him and to her! Even his laugh was changed. Everything was changed. Nothing would ever again be as it used to be. It was hard not to let the tears come. While he ate, she poured a plaintive stream of information into his ears. How could she help telling him everything? It was so sweet to feel he had come back to carry the load for her once more. He listened very patiently. The clattering sound of a horse's galloping feet came in to them presently through the open window of the dining-room.

"Some one riding a shod animal," Henry said, putting the last of the scrambled eggs on his plate. "I thought, from what Mrs. Sellers told me, horses and mules were rather scarce about here just now."

"They are." Mrs. White lifted the lid of the coffee-pot to pry anxiously into its dark depths: suppose Henry should ask for another cup of the stuff! "I don't know of half a dozen decent beasts left in the country. Cap Van

Dorn manages always to have a horse to ride, but then he has his own way of doing everything."

"That sounds like a slam at Cap. He used to be a prince of good fellows, and a prime favorite of yours. What has he been doing to get into your black books?"

"Hello the house!"

"There! It's somebody for here." Mrs. White put down the coffee-pot energetically. Events were certainly crowding upon each other's heels. The lusty "Hello the house!" was repeated before Henry had time to get to the front door and respond:

"Hello yourself!"

"Has Mr. White gone to bed?"

"No. Who's that and what do you want?"

"It's Cap Van Dorn, and—wait."

"He certainly must think you are anxious to see him." Mrs. White had followed her son to the front door, and made this comment in a resentful undertone close at his ear. "I suppose he wants to resume the old footing before you've heard—"

But there was no time for anything more. Cap Van Dorn had mounted to the gallery almost at a leap. His voice was husky as he said, "Old fellow! dear old fellow!" and seized Henry White's emaciated hands to wring them

affectionately. "I know Mrs. White would like to fling me over the garden palings," he said in lighter vein, as he moved in with them toward the interior, "but I assure you my coming here to-night was not a voluntary thing. I happened to let out to Major Wilson that you had gotten home, Hank, and nothing would do but I must give you this note before I slept. Why"—he fumbled excitedly in one pocket after the other.

While he was looking for the note, Henry White was scrutinizing him closely. His mother had already thrown out two hints that Cap Van Dorn was deservedly under condemnation in the neighborhood, but he had not the air of a man who was conscious of deserving such condemnation. He held his head as defiantly as of old, and Cap had always carried himself proudly. His eye was as keen and full as ever of "blue lightning," as the boys used to call it. His hair was a trifle long, and he looked rough enough with his trousers, the fruit of the plantation loom, stuffed into a pair of old army boots.

"Ah, here it is!" He laid the note in Henry's hand. "And now I'm off. No supper, thank you, Mrs. White"—this in response to a reluctant invitation. "Miss Amy was kind enough to give me some before I left the Major's. I'm

not such a brute as to want to divide Hank with you this first night. But I did think it was worth my while riding a mile or two out of my way just to shake the old fellow's hand. You'll let me come over soon and have a comprehensive talk-over with you?" Mrs. White stayed behind this time, while Henry walked to the front door, leaning on his friend's arm as in the olden days.

It would go hard with him but he would sift the charges against Cap very thoroughly before casting him out of his affections. Had the substitute divined his thoughts? It would seem so.

"Henry," he said, very gravely, turning on the threshold to rest both hands on his friend's shoulders, "you're going to hear a lot of rubbish about me. I'm in bad odor in the neighborhood. The women quite hate me. And if they were right in thinking what they do about me, they would owe it to themselves to hate me. It would have taken more words than I cared to waste on the thing to set matters right with all of them, so I've just let it go. But I don't want you to join in the hue and cry against me until—"

"I'll *never* join in any hue and cry against you, Cap, until—"

"Until what?"

"Until by your own confession you prove to me that you are changed in character from the old Cap Van Dorn I loved."

He could feel the quiver that passed through the strong frame of the young man, but he could barely catch the whispered "God bless you, old fellow!" that fell huskily from his lips, before he clattered down the front steps in his clumsy boots, mounted his horse, and dashed furiously back over the road he had come.

"Was it worth his while to interrupt you at the first meal in your own home for that?" said Mrs. White, looking resentfully at the note which had been the cause of the okra coffee's growing cold and the scrambled eggs clammy and the corn dodgers petrifying.

"I'm glad he came," said Henry, indifferently gulping down the remnant of his unappetizing supper in a way that made his mother gaze at him in mute amazement. "And he used to be so fastidious!" she murmured regretfully.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS RAY IN A PREDICAMENT.

MRS. WHITE had long since passed the age when she believed it possible to subsist on the emotions. Fanny might be very unhappy shut in upstairs there, but she must, also, be desperately hungry by this time. She wouldn't hurt Henry's feelings by seeming to approve of "the child's nonsense," but so soon as ever he should go to bed she really must carry Fanny up something to eat. It would be a comfort, too, to "have it out" with Fanny, and show her how absurdly she was acting. Then she wanted to complain to her of Major Wilson's unreasonable request, that Henry should come over there the next day. Couldn't they let her have her boy all to herself for one little day?

She found Miss Ray in a pathetic heap on the bed. She had sobbed herself into a state of exhaustion, and was looking excessively red about the eyes and swollen about the nose.

"You know, my dear," Mrs. White began, without preamble, "you are acting very un-

kindly." She sat down on the side of the bed and put her offering of cold corn-dodgers and sweet milk close enough to Fanny's red and swollen nose to have tempted her through that organ if the viands had not been absolutely odorless. "Of course, poor dear Henry does not look as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox. And if you'd spend nine months in one of those horrid military prisons, your beard would be long and shaggy, too, and if you'd had to wear the same clothes for—"

"Hush! oh, hush! I've been trying to forget how he looks. He used to be the perfection of neatness. Oh, I wish I had died before he ever came home looking like that! I am never going to look at him again. I'm going home to-morrow before breakfast, and I'm going to—to—oh! I wish there was a convent somewhere, where—"

"A lunatic asylum, you mean," said Mrs. White tartly. Her patience, which was enormous, was finally exhausted. She rose from the bedside in angry haste, shaking it so that the milk dropped over on to the corn-dodger, which did not improve Miss Ray's Confederate supper.

Up to that moment she had been steadily reminding herself of the fact that Fanny Ray had a great deal of excuse for feeling just as

she did. Herself as dainty and pure looking as a field-daisy, her returned lover's appearance must have been an awful shock to her. Then Fanny was very young, and had always been so systematically indulged by her whole family that she had come to look for like consideration of her wishes at the hands of fate. Fanny herself had meant that Henry should go off to fight the battles of his country in a beautiful new uniform and on a prancing horse—which he had done; and to come back, after annihilating the enemy, covered with gold lace and glory—which he had not done. And her grief at the turn events had taken partook largely of resentment. She had consumed the evening drawing bitter contrasts between the forlorn man who had come back, with the buoyant youth who had gone away, and Henry suffered by the contrast.

"I was going to tell you," said Mrs. White, turning upon her as she reached the door, "that Major Wilson has sent a note to ask Henry if he won't ride over there to-morrow morning and give him all the war news. It's natural for the poor old man to be impatient to hear it all, but he might have let Henry rest a little. He's going to send Commodore over for him to ride. I hope you won't be so foolish as to take that long ride back to Baldy's Point on an

empty stomach. I will see that you get some breakfast as soon as Henry starts. Of course I won't ask you to breakfast with him, under the circumstances."

"I'm going home before breakfast. He must quite hate me by this time. But—but—I could not help it."

It was the first glimmer of apology. Mrs. White seized upon it eagerly. Things would come right yet. She didn't want Henry to lose Fanny. She had been training herself for Fanny's mother-in-law for three years now, doing a little incidental training of Fanny too, and it would be a pity to have to commence all over again with some other girl. Moreover, the Rays were pre-eminently desirable connections, and the Ray plantation, so far, had suffered less than any place in the county. If possible, she would much rather adjust matters on the old basis. Good and gentle woman as she was, Mrs. White was not devoid of a modicum of worldly wisdom.

"I should hate for you and Henry not to be—friends, Fanny. You'd better just come down in the morning and make sort of light of it, you know; your not recognizing him, you know."

But Fanny had not passed her tragic years.

"Make light of it! Make light of losing my

bright, handsome, dashing lover! Make light of having my cherished memory of him torn up by the roots! Oh! you cruel, cruel woman!"

She had sat up among the pillows to hurl this reproach at the age-hardened woman in the doorway, and at its climax fell back among them again, sobbing bitterly.

Mrs. White turned away from the room, and shut the door behind her with a degree of emphasis that was entirely wasted for lack of somebody to appreciate it. Fanny was conscious only of herself, and Henry was blissfully unconscious of everything, wrapped in the profound slumber that came of extreme physical exhaustion.

He was awake very early the next morning. What a luxurious awakening it was, too! Soft pillows under his tired head, grown used to prison hardships; fleecy blankets over him—how superfine their excellence, by contrast! The tinted walls of his own bedroom, inclosing him almost as in a welcoming embrace; the old pictures, and the hanging shelves with his own books on them, and the familiar majolica vases on the mantel-shelf that used to get crowded up to the brim with everything that did not properly belong in a flower-vase, and his old straw hat on the hook behind the closet door—what luxury to lie there and renew ac-

quaintance with it all; with the many peaceful sounds of early morning in the country floating in to him through the open dormer window, whose white muslin curtain was swaying softly backward and forward in the fresh morning breeze. It pleased him to call it his flag of truce—a truce to all the pain and the hardship and the privations he had undergone so willingly but so uselessly. He wondered why he did not feel Fanny Ray's cruelty more keenly. Had he become case-hardened? Had he been exposed to the fierce heat of men's warring passions with such effect that a girl's petulant outcry against the inevitable failed to touch him? He was quite sure he had been as faithful to the memory of this girl as she could possibly have been to his; and yet here he was, quietly felicitating himself on clean sheets and soft pillows and the peace of being at home once more, in spite of the cruel attitude she had assumed toward him! If he had carried his analysis a little deeper he would have discovered the great underlying imperative fact of his own anatomy. He had been such an individual nonentity while a soldier that now, when the strain was removed, nature asserted her rights violently and would not be denied. But he did not carry his analysis any further. He heard the sound of a pacing horse, and

turned over languidly on his side to wonder why Major Wilson had sent Commodore over for him at such a godless hour of the morning. His bed was one of those immensely high, old-fashioned four-posters that one has to climb up into, and the windows of his room were open almost down to the floor, so where he lay he could command a long stretch of the green and grassy road that skirted the front of the plantation and led toward Baldy's Point. Into his line of vision there presently swept the pacing horse and its rider. It was Fanny Ray carrying her threat of going home before breakfast into energetic execution. How prettily she sat her horse! It was her daring horsemanship that had first attracted him to her. And how lithe and trim her form, with its sloping shoulders and rounded waist! Not even the clumsy blue cottonade skirt and the rough palmetto hat, tied down under her chin with a faded piece of pink ribbon, could disfigure her. He watched her until she was out of sight; then said, audibly, with a bitter compression of his lips, "So endeth that chapter. The next?"

"Why shouldn't you go with me, mother?" he said, an hour later, when the Wilson visit came up for discussion. "You'll be lonelier to day if I leave you than if I hadn't come back at all."

"I was thinking that myself," Mrs. White said ruefully, "but there isn't a mule or a horse on the place, so far as I know."

"If I remember rightly, old Commodore works as well in shafts as under the saddle. We might go in the buggy."

"What buggy?"

"Why, your buggy, of course."

"Webb and Dilsy rode away in style to Vicksburg in it a year ago."

There was no bitterness in her voice. These things had come to be too much a matter of course for resentment; in fact, had furnished food for half-hearted merriment during the war. Webb had been her carriage-driver, and Dilsy her chambermaid. She had missed them very much more than she had the buggy. But she would like to go with Henry.

"I tell you what we could do, son," she said, rather timidly. "If you wouldn't mind driving the dumping-cart, I could put a chair in it and go nicely. I've been wanting to get over to the Wilsons for a month. Amy cures her palmetto differently from any I've seen, and I want to show her how to make bluing out of that miserable little yellow weed we've always thought the most useless thing in the world. But perhaps you wouldn't like to drive the cart."

"Why not?"

"It isn't very stylish, you know, and you used to be so very particular about little things."

"That was before I had any big things to be particular about," he said, smiling gravely down into her anxious face. "If you can stand the dumping-cart, and Commodore can, I'm quite sure I shant object. Commodore used to be quite a swell himself when the Major and he were tricked out for a ride."

"Poor Major!" Mrs. White said it cheerfully (the Major was an old story), and hurried off to see about the dumping-cart and to inspect the harness, which was, after all, but a thing of odds and ends that sat clumsily enough on Commodore's sleek body.

Never in her palmiest days, when stepping into her brett, drawn by the handsomest pair of grays in the county, and further adorned by Webb's imposing form on the high driver's box, did Mrs. White make a greater display of dignity than she did on that morning when clambering into her seat in the dumping-cart. Indeed, it was an occasion that demanded the full exercise of all the dignity she could command, for that wretched little darky, Tony, who was holding the shafts down so that the cart should not dump inopportunely, was making a very disrespectful display of his white

teeth, and even Henry, who looked so much handsomer this morning since he had shaved off all that horrid hair on his face, leaving only his long mustache, seemed inclined to smile.

But it was very nice jolting along through the sweet-smelling woods with him, and, her tongue being once loosed by the exhilaration of a change, she out-chattered the blackbirds that ran from the peach orchard and flew before them in black clouds as they advanced.

"Why!"

Commodore had shied violently and set her to rocking in her splint-bottomed chair like a vessel in a stormy sea.

"There's a side-saddle in the road," said Henry, glancing down at the object which had so alarmed Commodore.

"And it's Fanny Ray's!" Mrs. White clutched the sides of the cart to lean over and make sure. "Yes, there's no mistaking it, it's Fanny Ray's."

"She has been thrown, then." Henry dropped the reins and stood up in the cart to look about him. The road was a plain wagon road leading through the woods, at that point. The trees crowded close up to it on either side. There was nothing visible but a lean cow biting off the succulent heads of some young

cane shoots. He sat down with a sigh of anxiety, and gathered up the reins once more.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. White, consoling the anxiety she saw in his face, "her girth broke and she couldn't mend it. I think her mare is perfectly safe, and she's quite capable of riding on, just on her saddle blanket."

This was a cheerful view of the case, and Henry got down from the cart somewhat slowly and laboriously, for his feet were untrustworthy yet, and, securing the side-saddle, put it into the cart and drove on a little further—for, perhaps, after all, she had not ridden home on the saddle-blanket. He drew Commodore up with a violent jerk before he had proceeded three yards further. There, placidly nibbling the short grass along the roadside, was Miss Ray's little roan mare, free from bridle or bit. And there, sitting on a fallen log, holding the bridle helplessly in her hand, sat Miss Ray herself. She was intensely pale when she first glanced up gladly at the sound of wheels, but flushed crimson when she identified the travelers.

Of all the predicaments for a woman to be thrown into! Fate certainly had a spite against her!

"Are you hurt, Fanny?" Mrs. White projec-

ted her voice shrilly ahead of her to ask anxiously.

She did not answer. From under the rim of her rough palmetto hat, whose shape had not been improved by her fall, she was taking swift mental note of several facts: Now that that awful beard was gone, Henry looked a little like his old self. He was shockingly thin, and the Scotch tweeds hung on him baggily, but he was very handsome yet. His eyes didn't look bloodshot and hideous as they had when he had come limping into Baldy's Point. How stern he looked! Of course he hated her now, and—and—he was going to spend the day at Amy Wilson's. They were abreast of her now, and he was standing before her repeating his mother's question quietly.

"Are you hurt? You will let me help you, I hope."

"My ankle turned under me as I fell, and I can't stand up. If you will kindly catch and saddle my horse for me, perhaps I can ride on."

"Nonsense! it's not to be thought of, Henry." Thus Mrs. White from the altitude of her chair in the cart. "Just put her right in here. We'd be having her faint next. She doesn't know anything about a sprained ankle; she couldn't put it in the stirrup. Fanny, do—don't act like an obstinate child!"

"Will you see first if you can stand up on your foot?"

He offered her his hand; she put hers in it. She never once lifted her eyes to his face; she could not. It was all so strange and unreal! He and she meeting thus, touching hands thus, talking thus, she and the man who had sworn to love each other forever and forever. She rose swiftly to her feet, only to fall back on the log with a cry of pain.

"Pardon me, but we are merely wasting time. I am afraid your judgment is at fault *again.*"

There was a strong infusion of bitterness on the word "*again.*" He held her hand firmly in his grasp while, with his arm about her waist, he half carried her toward the cart. Mrs. White lent her two strong and willing hands to the task of hoisting the young lady into the cart from which she had considerably removed the tail-board, and when all was done that circumstances would permit of for her comfort, Henry gravely resumed his place on the board across the front of the dumping-cart, and shook the rope-reins over Commodore's back.

It was a mute drive. An outsider would have seen the element of the ridiculous largely predominant in it all. But there were no outsiders there, unless, indeed, it was Commodore, and

this whole jaunt was a purely business transaction with him.

Mrs. White was thinking, comfortably, how nicely Fate had arranged to bring these two young people together again; and now, barring the pain in poor Fanny's swollen ankle, everything was as right as could be; she was inclined to be talkative, but met with no encouragement. Fanny was thinking that it would have been much kinder of that miserable little pony, whom they had left in the woods to find her own way home, to have killed her outright than to have left her to be carried home in a dumping-cart by the man whom she had repudiated and insulted twice in twenty-four hours. And Henry was thinking that perhaps he ought to be thankful for having found out the purely selfish nature of the girl he had asked to be his wife, before they had taken upon them those irrevocable vows that bind so many uncongenial spirits together for life. He was a poor man now, and had absolutely nothing but himself to offer any woman, and Miss Ray had been very prompt in expressing an opinion of that "self." It was a relief to all three of them when the really suffering girl was finally transferred from their keeping into her mother's, and the cart was once more on the Wilson road.

CHAPTER V.

A LOYAL FRIEND.

“W’ITE folks cert’n’y is onreasonable. Chile, does you know what day er de week dis is?”

The cook at Cedargrove suspended the hand scrub-brush with which she was vigorously scouring her kitchen shelves, to make this chronological inquiry of Amy, who stood looking at her with a queer admixture of apprehension and resolution in her eyes.

“Friday,” the “child” answered, with the promptness of a well-regulated calendar.

“En does yer know what termorrer ’ll be?”

“Saturday.”

“Well, den, does yer know w’at gwine happ’n de Sund’y-day arter dat Saterdag?”

Amy projected her mind forward by two days, then said apologetically, quite as if she stood self-convicted of an enormous share of that “onreasonableness” which her cook had divided impartially among w’ite folks generally:

"Oh, I forgot! Protracted meeting begins on Sunday."

"Kose you forgits. W'ite folks mos' genully do forgits, dese days. But doa I ain' forgit. Dat w'at I 'sumin' all my Friday fur er-scourin' stidder Saturday, 'kase I'se got mo'n 'nough t' do t'morrer wid a starchin' uv my w'ite ruffle petticoat en a-borrerin' uv Sis' Santhy's year-rings t' w'ar t' 'stracted meetin', en her livin' plum t'yother side er place. Cert'n'y dese is times uv refreshin', bless de Lam,' en yhere you come pest'rin' 'bout a puddin' fur dinner! W'ite folk cert'n'y is onreasonable. W'at good pudding gwine do yo' everlastin' soul w'en de debbil summon you, tell me dat, chile?"

It had been a plea for the honored guest that Commodore would presently bring to Cedargrove in triumph. If she could have prevented the sending of that note by Cap Van Dorn she certainly would have done so, but if Henry White actually was imminent she should like to make something of a festa of it. There was no danger of his thinking she was "making too much of him," for hadn't she been the very friend to whom he had confided his intention of proposing to Fanny Ray? How old Henry had always seemed to think her! He used to ask her advice as if she had been years and years older than himself instead of

one whole year younger. She supposed motherless girls always were old.

These reminiscent thoughts chased each other through Amy's brain as she advanced boldly into the kitchen, resolutely unfolding a piece of white tarlatan she had brought with her. (The Major's daughter had moved all her life in a very contracted sphere—this to account for the stress laid upon that pudding.) She was going to beard the lion in his den.

"Aunt Melindy, I am going to make a Confederate pudding for dinner. I'll bolt the meal myself, and then"—she stopped, aghast. What was the next step? It was Melindy who had first, by a stroke of genius, evolved a pudding out of bolted corn-meal, and the secret was locked up in her unpropitious breast.

"En den?" Melindy folded her shining arms and smiled maliciously at the discomfited novice.

"And then," said Amy, with a disarming smile, "you are going to finish it for me. You needn't bother about the white petticoat. I'll give you one for Sunday, and—" she hesitated. It was possible to pay too dear for her pudding, even if it was for the refreshment of a returned hero. (She simply wanted him to feel very, very welcome, you know.)

The shelves were scoured and the pans were

all rearranged on them, and Melindy was at leisure to conclude the bargain. Perhaps, after all, a compromise was possible; she beamed persuasively on the young lady.

"You ain' got any coat, honey, you sorter tired of, is you? Dat black alpacker er yo'n, now, ud be de ve'y thing t' w'ar to 'stracted meetin'. W'at yer tek fur it? Lindy ain' gwine t' be hard on you."

"I hadn't thought of selling it at all," Amy said, somewhat timidly. A decided refusal might jeopardize the day's dinner fatally. "I don't think it would fit you either, Aunt Lindy. You're a good deal larger than I am."

"Mout be a leetle tight 'bout de wais', en sorter choky 'bout de neck, but you kin fin' time t' let it out 'twix' now en Sund'y-day. I'se had a sorter hanker fur dat alpacker dis long timè. Zhere, you give Lindy dat piece er talteten, eny you git back in de house en prink up fer yo' beau, en Lindy'll hev de bes' dinner in dat house you's eat dis many a day. I did 'low t' br'ile dem chickins in de fatnin' coop fer you en yo' pa's Sund'y-day dinner, but I kin git some mo' fer dat. Clar out, chile!"

It was with qualified satisfaction that Amy resigned the tarlatan to her cook and "cleared out" to order. She knew the dinner would be all right, but she also knew what a price she

would pay for it. When Melindy should go to meeting next Sunday it would be in her, Amy's, black alpaca dress, and other requisitions from her already depleted wardrobe. People were already beginning to wonder how the Wilson establishment was "kept going." The Major disabled, no money coming in, no white man to manage, only Amy to superintend and suggest, and (she could have added) to sacrifice.

But it was not of her sacrifices, past or impending, that she was thinking of as she walked back across the yard. She went straight into her own room to take one more furtive look into the glass that always sent her away in a humble frame of mind. She would like to "prink" a little, as Melindy had advised, but she must set the dinner-table herself to-day. She could not trust Mandy to do it; Mandy's disposition of the knives and forks and salt-cellars was so absolutely original and in such reckless defiance of all accepted manuals on the subject. She wouldn't care to have Henry see her at it; he might think he was giving trouble—trouble, indeed! How could he tell how tumultuously her heart beat at the prospect of seeing him again once more? She hoped she could find a few yellow jessamine blossoms; they would look so pretty mixed with the white locust in a flat dish on the table.

How faded and old that glass made her look! Would Henry think so, too? She hoped Melindy wouldn't send the chickens in half raw, but the time had gone by when she dared give advice. How would a piece of colored ribbon at her throat and in her hair seem? If she'd only dared to give more explicit and positive directions to her cook. She hadn't worn a colored ribbon in her hair for—oh, for ever!—it seemed so long since there'd been any use of it all; father liked her just as well without. How proud Fanny Ray must feel, now that the war was over, and Henry back well, and—into this medley of reflections Mrs. White's plaintive voice was projected as Mrs. White's mature arms enfolded her affectionately.

"Here I am, my dear! I know you didn't expect me too, but I just couldn't let Henry leave me the very first day, and he said it wouldn't do at all to disappoint the Major, especially after he'd taken the trouble to send Commodore over for him, and so we just compromised on the dumping-cart, and it's well we did, for who should we find sitting on the side of the road, with the bridle in her hand and a sprained ankle, but Fanny Ray, and that's the reason we're about an hour behind time, because, of course, we couldn't leave her sitting there, although, under the circumstances, it was

very trying to her, and to Henry too, but I suppose Henry's learned to stand fire pretty well, for he was just as cool as a cucumber, and lifted her into the cart as tenderly as if she'd been his own mother with sprained ankle, which ought to have made her feel like coals of fire were being heaped on her head, but it's hard to heap coals of fire on some people's heads, for they won't stay heaped, and we just stopped in front of the Rays long enough to tell Mrs. Ray to put some balsam apple to the ankle, and then drove right straight on here. How very sweet you do look, Amy, never saw a girl like you!"

Mrs. White had delivered her budget breathlessly while getting out of her bonnet and smoothing the thin, wavy hair about her delicate temples and shaking out the stiffly-starched calico dress, which had not profited by the long ride. Mrs. White was what people called "a talker." Not that she devoted her life exclusively to that vocation, but when she was in a good humor she generally found plenty to say, and to-day she was in prime order for talking. Henry's return, and the ride over the country roads and through the wide fields where the yellow camomile flowers and the low-running sprays of the dewberry tenderly clothed the neglected furrows, had proved

exhilarating. Happiness had loosed the flood-gates.

Amy looked at her in a puzzled way, waiting patiently to ask:

"Why should Henry want to heap coals of fire on Fanny Ray's head?"

"Oh, my child, Fanny has acted so ridiculously! But it will all come right. Henry's devoted to her and she to him. I could see that in the remorseful way she looked at him when he parted from her so coldly at her mother's. You see, my poor, dear boy did look worse than a runaway darky yesterday, with his great ragged beard and his frazzled-out uniform and his bare feet, and she didn't know him, simply did not know him. There was no put-on about it."

"Not know Henry White?"

The girl's eyes and voice were full of amazed incredulity. What possible disguise could conceal his identity from her?

"But it will all come right," Mrs. White said again cheerfully, taking a very much starched handkerchief out of her pocket and rubbing it vigorously between her hands by way of limbering it slightly before application.

"Yes, it will all come right." Amy repeated her words in a mechanical way; then, more animatedly, "Now I must go tell Mr. White

how glad I am he's gotten back home uninjured. Think of poor papa! I'm afraid he will have about a bushel of questions to answer before he can satisfy father."

She moved toward the door with her arm locked in the older woman's. She was tall and slim and straight, and carried her head with an erectness that was almost defiant, but the defiance was absolutely contradicted by the gentleness of her expression and the sweet sensitiveness of her pretty mouth. Just now her eyes were unnaturally bright, and a vivid red spot shone on either cheek. Mrs. White turned to look at her inquiringly, laying a finger on the wrist nearest her before delivering herself judicially. The pulse was beating furiously. "Amy Wilson," she said, severely, "you're having those horrid chills again. You're getting one right now. I can feel the shivers running through your body. Did you take those red-oak bitters I wrote you about?"

"I've taken nothing but bitters for years past," Amy said, withdrawing her hand and moving on by herself.

"Then I'm surprised you are not stronger," said Mrs. White, applying the preternaturally stiff handkerchief to her nose with reddening effect.

"So am I," said Amy quietly.

But Mrs. White heard only what was said, and continued, practically. "After you and Henry have said 'howdy' we will have to let the men entertain each other, dear. I've been six months getting over here, and I've got a lot to see and to talk about, that they won't care to hear. You really must tell me how you make your starch. Mine is simply abominable. I won't have any cuticle at all left pretty soon. But I suppose, now that we're whipped, we'll be able to get some of the necessaries of life again. Did you hear about Tillie Mosby going up to Vicksburg, on a government transport, as soon as ever she heard Vicksburg had fallen, and actually taking two bales of cotton on board with her, and coming back just loaded down with things to eat and to wear? They say she bought a pair of shoes for every member of that big family, and a whole bolt of muslin, and Mrs. Mosby has had tea and sugar ever since. Well, those that can enjoy things gotten in that way are welcome to them, but I'd rather wait for the fight to be fought out before I take any comfort of that sort. I'd like to know what good Oolong tea and crushed sugar and a whole bolt of domestic would have done me, before I knew whether Henry was coming back or not, and then maybe with only one leg and no arms. Thank Heaven he's come back with

all his legs and arms and his faculties too, but the Scotch tweeds do hang desperately baggy on him, poor fellow! and his cheeks are so hollow you could lay a walnut in either one of them. Henry, my dear, here's Amy. You haven't forgotten Amy, but you can't call her 'little Amy' any longer."

It had been really necessary to attract his attention. He was sitting facing the Major, and, with his back to the front door, was tracing with a piece of chalk, on the gallery floor, a diagram of the respective positions of Federal and Confederate troops at the time of the surrender. And Amy was so absurdly timid she would have stood rooted to that door-sill forever before advancing another step. "Timidity" was what Mrs. White called it.

Her son had dropped the piece of chalk and come forward promptly enough at her bidding. Amy put out one hand hesitantly, then both, eagerly, impulsively, and, as she held his, warm and brown and muscular as they were, in a firm, tight clasp, the tears welled slowly into her eyes, and she looked at him through a mist of divine pity.

How tall and stately and pure she was!—like some perfect ascension lily that had bloomed in an out-of-the-way nook. Time had dealt very kindly with her. He felt old and rugged

by the side of her, and very conscious of the baggy tweeds.

"It is good of you not to have forgotten me," he said, "or rather to have recognized me." He bowed low over their clasped hands.

"We're so glad, so very glad, to have you back again!"

Her "we" was comprehensive and impersonal. It had always been her aim to make her intercourse with Henry White as impersonal as possible. She felt the necessity of making it so now pressing more strongly upon her than ever.

"Yes, but, Henry"—the Major was gazing steadily down on the chalky seat of war—"how in the mischief did Lee get there?"

He brought his crutch vigorously down on the puzzling diagram, and held it there while he waited impatiently for the young man to return to his chair.

"I'm afraid you will find father's grown to be terribly tyrannical," Amy said lightly, moving with him toward the Major and the diagram. She was not sure, if she stood still another second, that more tears would not come and crowd those that she had concealed by the dropping of her lids into undesirable conspicuity.

He looked so dreadfully worn! The bitter-

ness of defeat and disappointment had graven harsh downward curves in the corners of his mouth. He stooped, too, and he had once been so very straight. Even its voice had lost its clear ring; he spoke slowly and deliberately, almost languidly, now, quite as if he had outlived all necessity for being brisk or positive about anything. Yes, he was very much changed. He looked stern, too; there was an almost severe look in his eyes—and yet—she liked him better so. The light-hearted boy Henry White had been left somewhere along the line of march, and in his stead an earnest, thinking, deliberating man had come back to them. Would Fanny Ray think it an improvement?

He had bent once more over the diagram with the chalk in his hand, not conscious that the stately young girl who leaned over the back of the Major's chair in apparent absorption in his explanation of the disastrous finale to all their hopes was, in reality, revising and amending her own girlish estimate of himself.

Passive participation in the activities of other people was not Mrs. White's forte. She tired very soon of the chalked lines on the floor and her own enforced dumbness, so she proposed an inspection of Amy's poultry yard and vegetable garden, to which proposition

Amy yielded a reluctant inward assent, but moved away with her promptly.

"I felt a little reluctant at asking you to come over to me so soon, my boy," the Major said, after the women had drifted away from them, "but you can't imagine what infernal torment it is to sit here and guess at what has been going on, and not be able to lend a hand."

"I think I can. I think I can imagine what it would have been to me to lose my legs in the very first engagement, and I don't think you could ask anything of any one of the boys that have grown up about you, Major, that they wouldn't be glad to do. I'm sure I can speak for Cap and myself."

"I feel pretty sure of you, my boy."

"And Cap?"

He said it questioningly. Here was a third fling at the boy of all others whom he used to love and honor most.

"I'm not so sure of him, that's all. I wish you'd bring me my tobacco box off the hall table, Henry—I'm a useless hulk these days; and if you'll open the table drawer you'll find another pipe. Fetch it along. We've got time for a good smoke before dinner. Melindy's so infernally slow, your opportunity for cultivating an appetite is better than good. I'm

afraid Amy's inclined to indulge the servants too much. They walk over her rough-shod."

Henry went after the tobacco box. He was fully impressed with the fact that the Major wanted to change the subject. He expected to see Van Dorn again in a few days, and he supposed then he would hear Cap's own version of the strange attitude the neighbors had all assumed toward him; but meanwhile he would like to get Major Wilson's version. Irascible and high-tempered as the old man had always been, he was honorable to the core, and whatever version he gave, it was sure to be the one necessity had compelled him to indorse. Cap Van Dorn must have changed radically if he, too, was not honorable to the core. He saw the Major's pipe well alight before saying, with a simple directness that did him honor:

"Major, I want to hear what this is about Cap Van Dorn. My mother has thrown out some damaging hints, and Cap himself, hurried as he was last night, gave me to understand that he was in bad repute in the neighborhood. I wouldn't let mother explain. Blessings on her, she's never been able to forgive any man who ran less risk of being killed than her precious offspring; as for Cap—well, he, presumably, would be a partial witness. I want to hear your version of it."

"Version! Why, confound it, sir, that's what I haven't got. Wish I had. I hate to be baffled. I hate mysteries of any sort. But Cap Van Dorn's conduct has been and still is the most baffling and mysterious thing I've ever had to cope with. That's what riles me so." The Major puffed angrily and silently at his short briarwood pipe for a few seconds.

"But what has he done?" Henry White asked, resolutely. "That's what I want to get at, and what I intend to get at."

"Well, you know Briarwood, the Van Dorn place, is so tucked in, 'way back there on Panther Bayou, that the very dickens might be to pay without anybody being much the wiser for it. It was when I came back all shot to pieces that I found Cap Van Dorn's name was afloat in a rather unpleasant way. People said that while every man that could shoulder a gun had hurried off to the war, Van Dorn stayed behind like a skulking hound, and didn't seem to have any interest in life but the crops on Briarwood. But when, at the end of the first year of the fight, it got out that he finally enlisted as Amos Baker's paid substitute, the racket was pretty lively, I can tell you. He was back home in little more than eighteen months after he left. Some say he deserted. Some say he was taken prisoner and discharged

on taking the oath. Nobody knows when he got back nor how. Like a thief in the night, it looks like. Very few people ever get to Briarwood, but"—the Major looked around cautiously. Amy's and Mrs. White's bonneted heads out there near the calf-pen reassured him; notwithstanding which he leaned over and dropped some words cautiously into Henry White's ears. "People who have been in the neighborhood say there's something wrong at the Briarwood house. The Van Dorns were always notoriously hospitable, but this one never allows an outsider to sleep under his roof. If he's compelled to give a traveler a night's lodging, he puts him up in the overseer's house, and you know the size of the Briarwood house as well as I do. And that's where the mystery comes in. I don't approve of mysteries or mystifiers, and the consequence is I've felt like having as little to do with this young fellow as possible. I never like to hound a man down on an uncertainty, and if Amy was out of the question I wouldn't care whether he came here or stayed away, for he's a bright fellow and as entertaining as they make em. But, as matters stand—well—"

"He didn't use to be a coward," said Henry, dwelling meditatively on his friend's strange war record.

"No. He was as plucky as Julius Cæsar when he was a stripling."

"And he doesn't now carry himself like a man burdened with a sense of shame or wrongdoing."

"No," said the Major again, "that's the most confoundedly puzzling part of it. But when he must know that there's no end of unfavorable comment passing on him, why don't he come out like a man and explain himself?"

"Perhaps he's not ready to do it yet."

"Ready! Yet!"

"No, sir; and until he does, I, for one, will reserve judgment on my friend," said Henry, loyally and lovingly.

CHAPTER VI.

A VISIT TO BRIARWOOD.

WHEN a man who has been virtually drowned finds himself cast upon firm ground panting and exhausted from contention with the elements that have overwhelmed him, his first sensation, presumably, is exclusively one of absolute physical relief, and he quiescently accepts the boon of life afresh. It is only later on, when restored vitality brings with it renewed critical faculty, that he begins to analyze the situation and to search for the underlying reason of the catastrophe, without which the average man can never rest content.

In some such fashion as this the paroled soldier of the Southern army looked out upon what was to them a badly battered world. In the first bewilderment that followed upon the close of the war, their attitude was one of exhaustion and quiescence. They had buffeted the waves and been whelmed by them, and when there came an end to fighting and to marching and to maneuvering and to hoping,

it was more as if they were becalmed than at rest in a peaceful haven. Only for a little while, though; then they began to question: What should they eat and wherewithal should they be clothed, these shipwrecked mariners of a lost cause? Where should they begin the work of rebuilding their homes? On what foundations should they lay the new structure of their futures? Had the Israelites of old any harder task? Looking around on his weed-choked fields, fenceless and fallow; on his cabins, given over to a sort of squatter sovereignty, occupied by whomsoever chose to come with a minimum of shabby furniture and a maximum of mouths to feed and enter into possession; on his barns, guiltless of grain, and his stables, of beasts, Henry White doubted it.

Only a few lethargic weeks given to physical recuperation and unprofitable brooding, and he bestirred himself to the extent of deciding that something must be done. What—how—were not at all clear yet. He was conscious of needing somebody stronger than his mother, more impersonal and helpful to consult with. She took such a plaintive view of the situation, and could see nothing but direct and disastrous bearing on her and hers. She was not the one to show him how to wrest good from

evil. Her tear-dimmed vision could not pierce the overhanging clouds to their possible silver lining. Fanny? He thought bitterly of her defection at the moment of his sorest need. He had not seen her since depositing her at her mother's door. He did not care to go to Baldy's Point to be lionized by the women, or criticised and questioned by the men who were gradually dropping back into the old places. The Major? He was grown too irascible to be a judicious counselor for a young man resolutely bent on adjusting his life to the new conditions and letting his dead bury its dead. Amy? She never once presented herself in this mental review of possible advisers in so stern an extremity. Amy was a good girl, doubtless, and had grown to be wonderfully pretty in the last few years, but what should she know of the perplexities and trials incident upon making a living for himself and his mother, with nothing that he could call his own but the land (that lay in a mass of tangled neglect about him) and the tumble-down cabins in the quarters? Of all the names on this small list of his possible counselors in this trying time, Amy Wilson's was the least available. There was but one left—Cap Van Dorn; and as the days went by, bringing no sign of Cap's handsome face nor sound of his cheery voice,

Henry White's heart went out to him with irrepressible longing.

"I expect he doesn't feel very welcome here," said Mrs. White. "I shouldn't wonder if he had got hold of some of my speeches about him. I wasn't mealy-mouthed about his staying at home when all the rest of the boys were gone, and he with not a thing in the world to care for but just his lone self. I expect if you want to see him you will have to hunt him up. Not that I can imagine what you want to see him for, for if ever a young man did forfeit everybody's esteem, that young man is Cap Van Dorn."

"I think I'll go to see him this afternoon," Henry said reflectively, ignoring the innuendoes he had grown accustomed to by this time, "and I expect I'd better make an early start, mother. It's a good seven miles. But I can walk it easily."

"I don't know what any one would want to shorten the road to Briarwood for; they'd better block it up entirely, I say. Besides, it's going to rain, Henry."

His mother stretched her hand out in hopes of giving him ocular demonstration that it was raining.

"A passing shower, perhaps. I don't think

as much of a wetting as I used to, mother. I think I'll go."

She had learned to respect without quite understanding that new grave look in her son's face. He never used to say what he would or would not do so very positively. She was not as happy as she felt she ought to be in those early days of his return. She did not like his absolute refusal to talk about Fanny Ray, for one thing. Of course it would all blow over in a little while, but she would like it to blow over immediately. Fanny was such a very desirable mate for Henry. And now here he was, going off on a tramp through the woods, and it was so dangerous in the woods in case of a storm, and so many dead limbs on the trees, and if it was to see any body but Cap Van Dorn she shouldn't so much mind. Formerly, Mrs. White would have given her son the benefit of these perturbations, but she did not now. There was something in the look of quiet endurance that sat so pathetically on his young face, more used to smiles and jests in the olden time, that abashed her and frequently caused her to curtail her criticism on the new order of things and of everybody but poor Cap Van Dorn. Nevertheless it was with a gravely disapproving frown that she watched him pass out through the front gate with that firm, soldierly tread

and erect bearing which were the only ones of his new possessions she looked upon as improvements.

Actually going to see Cap Van Dorn, whom everybody else had felt compelled to drop, and going on foot, and a storm coming up! She was quite sure it was going to be a violent storm, and that it would overtake Henry in the very thickest of the woods, where the danger from dead limbs would be greatest. (This was Mrs. White's way of comforting herself.) Furthermore, Henry might get lost; of course the roads had changed some. But it was neither of the storm that might come, nor the possibility of any evil betiding himself, that Henry was thinking as he found himself once more following the narrow foot-path through the woods which he and Cap had trodden together so many times with their shot-guns on their shoulders, only too alert to cock and fire them if a woodchuck did but dare show its nose.

Things must be pretty bad at Briarwood for Cap to shun him in this fashion. And he couldn't rid himself of a desire to get at the bottom of it. If everybody was right and Cap was all wrong, he wanted to know it for himself. If Cap was right and everybody else all wrong, he did not intend to ignorantly array himself with his friend's traducers. It was fresh

and sweet in the woods; he did not care very much about reaching Briarwood before sunset; he'd have the whole evening to talk with Cap, for of course he intended to stay all night. He had given his mother warning not to look for him until after breakfast the next morning. In the days toward which his thoughts reverted inevitably on this the first occasion of his traveling the old path, whichever house had happened to be nearest to them at nightfall furnished them food and shelter, his own or Briarwood, and he was going to make Cap understand that he was just as welcome at Whitefields (Henry's own home) as he ever had been. If his mother, good woman that she was, had been helping plant thorns in poor Cap's flesh, it was time he was pulling some of them out.

He was too familiar with the road to take any special heed to his steps. There was neither novelty to invite, nor the striking beauty of hill and dale that insists upon tribute even from the familiar eye, around him. Only long green stretches of a grass-bordered foot-path stretching through several miles of unbroken woodland, where the birds mated, nested, and tried new wings unmolested every year. The trees crowded upon each other so thickly that though only the foliage of early spring clothed their

branches, the sunlight came through softened and mellowed. The silence was broken occasionally by the sound of a dry twig breaking under his feet, or the scurry of a frightened pig rooting restlessly under the dead leaves of the last fall for a stray persimmon or acorn. Once in a while he caught the plaintive note of the wild turkey hen, and, with the impulse of boyish days, he would call back through his interlocked fingers, in the cock's wilder note of invitation, that betrayed no human counterfeit. How it all carried him back, and how every step he made toward Briarwood strengthened his desire to put things on the old footing with its master! It gradually dawned on him that he had been walking quite long enough to have come in sight of the Briarwood gin-stack, or at least old Sandy's cabin. Old Sandy used to be the stock-minder at Briarwood, and his cabin on the outskirts of these woods was a sort of outpost to the plantation. He stood still to take his bearings. There were no special landmarks he could recall besides those two, and, turn which way he would, he could catch no glimpse of either one of them. Thus brought out of his reverie, he took note of the sudden hush that seemed to have fallen upon the world, and looked upward anxiously to where he could catch sight of the clouds blotting out

the bright blue sky. The leaves that had been rustling musically over his head now hung motionless upon their stems. The birds ceased twittering, and by the faint whir of wings he knew they were flitting from tree to tree in an ecstasy of alarm. These woodland signals were all familiar to him. After all, his mother's lugubrious prophecy was about to be fulfilled and he overtaken by a thunder-storm in these shelterless woods. He shouldn't mind the wetting so very much, for he supposed Cap could lend him some dry clothes, but he certainly should like to know where he was. As he grew more and more bewildered, he grew excursive, and wandered tentatively into every little by-path that promised to give him a glimpse of the towering brick chimney to the Briarwood gin-house. If he could only see that, with its diamonds of black brick for a crowning ornamentation, he would be all right.

He was entirely out of the beaten path, when, with a grand discharge of heaven's artillery and a sharp, rattling volley of hailstones, the thunder-storm burst upon him in all its fury, with the usual accompaniments of wind and uproar. He buttoned his coat tightly over his breast, pulled his hat firmly down over his ears to secure it against the swirls of wind that threatened to lift it from his defenseless head,

and, with his hands in his trousers pockets, plunged headlong and blindly forward. The hailstones fell with smiting power on the tender foliage over his head, bringing it in a shower of green shreds earthward with themselves. The slim saplings bending before the power of the storm swept his cheeks with their cold, wet limbs, the path grew heavy and sodden under his feet, and still no sign of old Sandy's cabin or the gin-stack. Instead, with an abruptness that almost made him start, a brand-new fence impeded his progress. It was a peculiar fence, unlike anything that had ever been found necessary in that quiet neighborhood before. It was built of rude cypress slabs, over five feet in height, and so closely planted that the fence virtually became a wooden wall, As he approached this formidable-looking barrier to his progress, his surprise increased. Beyond a doubt, that gray roof, with the four outside chimneys clambering up its gable ends, with its sloping sides pierced by the three dormer windows, that looked so familiar, was the roof of the Briarwood house. There were the four cottonwood trees that stood primly in a row just in front of it, and the mulberry at the corner, whose shiny but forbidden fruit had proven such a sore temptation to Cap and to him in their reckless days.

It was a queer fence for Cap to have drawn about the old house, but he supposed it was necessary for the protection of his gardens and henneries and other possessions against the lawless new tenants of the old cabins. All these speculations as he cast his eyes to the right and to the left of him in search of a gate. He could tell from the position of the cottonwood trees inside that he had struck the rear of the premises. The Briarwood house faced toward the quarters and the big road. He remembered old Mrs. Van Dorn had located her home right on the edge of the woods for the benefit of her stock and poultry. But a gate seemed an impossible thing to find. He supposed he must travel clear around to the road side, or perhaps even to the front, before finding one. He was so thoroughly drenched now that it made very little difference to him personally whether the rain fell or ceased to fall. It ceased to fall with the suddenness that had characterized its beginning. One or two distant crashes of thunder, rolling majestically off to lose themselves in a faint rumble, a sobbing of the tired wind in the tree-tops, then with a joyous flash the sun burst forth again and spanned the old gray roof behind the cypress palisades with a glorious rainbow. In one spot two or three of the cypress boards had

yielded to the pressure of the storm and lay prone, leaving a gap quite wide enough for him to pass through. What was the use of standing on ceremony with Cap? He knew the back yard at Briarwood as well as at Whitefields. There was the old smoke-house, and the dairy, and the hen-house, but the yard wasn't quite so populous with darkies as it used to be. They used to be visible at every turn, but now there wasn't a living thing moving but one or two lean calves, just coming from under the shelter of the old smoke-house eaves to nibble the short grass that looked so preternaturally green under the rainbowed sky, and a few hens clucking encouragingly to the broods, whose clustering little yellow legs were all that was visible of them from under the sheltering wings. It positively began to be awe-inspiring, this absence of stir of any sort. He'd find Cap on the front gallery. What a lonely spot it was, to be sure! He strode toward the back steps rapidly (his wet clothes were beginning to feel rather chilly), but as he reached the top one he stopped, and for once in his life felt utterly unable to decide whether he should fly or stand his ground.

The doors, both front and back, were wide open, giving a full view of the grand old hall, furnished just as Henry had remembered it all his life, with the comfortable straw settee on

the side where the steps climbed up to the second story, and with the square table covered with books just opposite it. There was Cap, apparently sound asleep, on the settee, and, sitting close by his head in a low rocker, so close that by putting out her hand she could lay it on the mass of curly brown hair that clothed the sleeper's head, sat a young woman whom Henry was quite sure he had never seen before. An immense doll lay in her lap, and all around and about the low, armless rocker she sat in was a litter of doll's wardrobe and other childish things. She was engaged at that moment in arranging the tow curls on the head of the waxen belle in her arms. Her task absorbed her so completely that Henry had ample time to note the slender grace of her form, the refined contour of her face, and the beauty of the hands that were busy with the doll's toilet.

Something caused her to glance upward. Her large blue eyes dilated like a startled child's, her full, red lips parted to give utterance to a moan such as a frightened animal might have made, she put one hand upon Cap's sleeve and clutched it tightly, without once taking her distressed eyes off the bewildered man in the doorway.

Her touch roused the sleeper. With a

bound Van Dorn rose to his feet with an oath on his lips. It died away as he recognized Henry, and an expression of mingled pain and perplexity swept over his handsome face, which, now that he saw it for the first time in daylight, looked old and careworn to the friend who had forced an entrance for himself.

He came forward with a fair show of hospitality, and offered his hand with a nervous laugh. The pressure it received must have given him a mute assurance that, in spite of everything, some one still believed in him.

"How did you get in?" he asked, leading his uninvited guest away from the hall out to the chairs on the back gallery, talking with nervous garrulity the while. "I've got but one gate, and the key of that is always in my pocket. Ah! I see!"—his quick eye fell on the broken slabs before Henry could explain. "Well, perhaps it is just as well as it is. I've been wanting to talk the whole mess over with you ever since you got back, but—well"—he hesitated, turned to the hall, and said, in an ineffably gentle voice, "Poor little Nellie!"

But there was no one in the hall. The girl with the great, tender blue eyes and the huge doll and all the childish litter had disappeared as if by magic. Van Dorn turned to his friend,

and, laying both hands on his shoulders, said in a serious voice :

"I'm glad it's happened so. I wasn't strong enough to ask you to come, but it's all for the best. Yes, I'm glad it's happened so."

But he did not look it. He motioned Henry toward one of the big gallery chairs, and, turning away from him, walked to the end of the gallery, where he played wild havoc with a clambering cypress vine, whose ambitious tendrils gave fleeting occupation to his nervous fingers. Henry watched him with affectionate concern. He was quite sure Cap was absolutely indifferent to the tendency of those vagrant tendrils. What was it he found it so hard to unburthen himself of?

"Never mind that vine, Cap," he said presently, in a decided voice; "it can wait, and I can't."

"You're going to stay all night?" Cap said, questioningly, coming over to him quickly.

"I thought I was when I left home—but—"

"You doubt your welcome?"

"Yes."

"Don't, old fellow. Dear old Hank! stay—if you can stand it."

CHAPTER VII.

CONTAINS AN EXPLANATION.

STAND what?

He had not asked the question; had only meant to do so, when there arose on the quiet air a sound that made him turn toward Van Dorn in startled surprise, only to see him bury his face, white and drawn into lines of pain, in his outstretched hands, and cower, as it were, under that terrible sound. It was a wail, low, long, plaintive, increasing slowly in volume until it reached a shriek of agony and culminated in a paroxysm of the wildest moans and sobs. The old house, with its thin wooden partitions and loosly hung doors, permitted the soul-sickening commotion to fall distinctly on the ears of the two men sitting there on the gallery, filling one of them with amazed curiosity, crushing the other one under a sense of his own powerlessness to assuage. A woman's voice, commingling soothing words and gentle tones with each outbreak, came out to them alone. The sufferer, whoever he or she might

be, was not alone or friendless. Van Dorn removed his shaking hands to say :

"You don't know what it is, Henry, to go through life feeling like a murderer! I do." A perceptible shudder ran through his strong frame.

"Who is she?" Henry White asked. He was too much confused for comment. It was an inconsequent reply, but those tortured shrieks must issue from the sweet red lips of the girl he had seen in the hall, and the entire situation was bewildering to him.

Cap sat with his eyes fixed on the rain-soaked yard where the calves were lazily nibbling the short Bermuda grass. A look of stolid endurance had come into his handsome young face. It was as if he had nerved himself for an ordeal.

"She's always that way after she's been frightened," he said presently. "You startled her. She never sees anybody but Mammy and me. It's Nellie Hall. Poor little Nellie! and I'm more of a murderer than if I'd killed her outright."

"Nellie Hall!" Henry repeated the name reflectively. Evidently it conveyed no impression.

Then Cap braced himself to tell all there was to tell of the inexplicable in his life for the past

few years, all that had exercised the neighbors so variously and left him branded with the stigma of cowardice and treachery.

"This sword has been hanging over me ever since I was about thirteen years old, Hank, but it is easy work fighting off trouble when it's at a distance and may never come any nearer. I thought, maybe, you'd remember the name at least. Her father overseed for father only two years. But now I come to think of it, it was just about that time you went to school with the Ray boys out at Baldy's Point and got so thick with Fanny Ray that you didn't have eyes or ears either for anything else. By the way, I suppose there's been no end of Othello and Desdemona passages between you and her since you came home a laureled hero." (He was consciously fencing.)

"There's been no very soft passages," Henry answered curtly. "But I'm more interested in what you were going to tell me than in anything else just now."

Then Cap took the plunge in dead earnest and went on almost breathlessly until he had reached the end.

"It's a pretty dark chapter out of my life, Hank, and as long as you can't possibly help me I don't see much use in boring you with

it. If you could have helped me, old fellow, I wouldn't have shunned you as I have done since you came back home."

"Who knows? Perhaps I can help you," Henry said, leaning forward to rest his hand on his friend's knee.

"Thank you, Hank; you've helped me already, I believe. But as for her"—he stopped; the moans were growing slighter and further apart—"Mammy has given her her opiate—poor little girl, poor little Nellie!" No pen can describe the infinite pathos he laid upon those words. "She ought to be in some good woman's keeping, but—well, let me begin over again.

"You don't remember father's overseer, Hall, I reckon. He was a gruff sort of fellow, that none of us liked much. I know I used to wonder if he didn't beat his wife, she had such a thin, pinched, white face, and such a scared pair of eyes. His little girl, poor little Nellie in yonder, was all the child they had, and she was such a pretty, gentle little thing that mother used to have her up to the house a good deal, and made a sort of pet of her. I didn't see much of her in those days, for when I wasn't at my books I was—well, pretty much everywhere where there was any mischief to get into. Boys are brutal things by nature,

Hank, don't you think? I remember the delight of my life was to cut teeth and eyes, and a nose into a big pumpkin, hollowed out for the purpose, to put a candle inside, wrap a sheet all around me, and, with this illuminated ghoul's head held over my own until my rsacally little arms ached with the weight of it, invade the quarters at night and scare all the little niggers into fits. It was prime fun, for it never did them any harm beyond a squawk or two. But one night, after a decidedly successful round as a 'ghost,' one of the boys suggested I should scare the overseer's family, and I quite relished the idea of giving old Hall a turn. I saw only a moment's fun in it, you know, miserable little fool that I was; and so I wrapped my sheet about me, after seeing to the candle inside that accursed pumpkin head, and I crouched under the overseer's windows to give them a little fright. I don't think I thought of Nellie at all, or if I did, I never understood what a delicate, nervous little creature she was. I heard them all pushing their chairs back from the supper-table and walking toward the sitting-room. I could hear Nellie's little feet coming with a skip toward the window where I was crouching. She was a happy little thing, and the overseer and his wife just adored her. I rose suddenly from my crouching

position. The overseer's house sat low on the ground. My shoulders and the hideous face came just above the window-sill. I'll never forget the shriek of terror that broke from the child's lips! I've heard it often enough since, God knows, but that night it curdled the blood in my veins. I flung the infernal nonsense aside and tore into the house to try to explain to her. There was no chance to do it. She was writhing in convulsions in her mother's arms. She was very ill after it. There's no use going over the whole miserable business. Her mind is a wreck. She's stopped mentally just where she was then, at seven. The overseer and his wife hated me—small blame to them. The mother was a Kentucky woman. She went back home with the child to see what change would do for her. The father stayed behind, swearing that if he could he would inflict some harm on me yet. I didn't blame him. But I didn't see very well how he could wring any satisfaction out of me for the ruin of his home. I would have given it voluntarily if he could. Father insisted they should let him pay Nellie's expenses in some sort of institution for the afflicted. He got curses only for his offer. When I went off to college the cloud seemed to lift a little, or perhaps it only floated a little higher up and

farther off. After Mrs. Hall left for Kentucky with Nellie, we could never hear anything direct about her. Hall stayed in the neighborhood only a year. Then he, too, drifted out of sight, hating me as fiercely as ever. We heard he had gone to Kentucky to rejoin his wife. You know people of that class have an idea that disgrace attaches to the mentally afflicted. I can only account for Hall's reserve about this whole matter on that score. As far as I can discover, he never spoke of it to any one in the neighborhood; but then he was surly and secretive by nature. He was deep, too. You remember how father and mother went, within a few weeks of each other, just as the war broke out? Father was a stanch Union man. He never entertained the slightest hope of success for the Confederate arms. I was telegraphed for from college when Arkansas seceded. I gave Yale up with a groan. I found things in a sorry enough fix here at home. Some fellow in New Orleans had gotten hold of the mortgages on the place and was putting on the thumbscrews. War times put a stop to all legal proceedings; but father was worn out with the struggle to keep me at college and the place from going to the dogs at the same time. He didn't live through the first year. It was hard on me, Hank, to see all of you

fellows going off, in your gray coats, to fight, with all the girls in tears over you, and I left behind like a skulking hound. Before father died he tried to make me swear I wouldn't go into the secession movement. He cast the horoscope of its future pretty correctly. I made him no promise beyond saying that mother's comfort should be my first care in life. But she followed him so soon that there wasn't much left to do for her. It wasn't more than a week after I'd laid her to rest by father, out there in the garden, that I got a queer sort of note from Louisville. It was signed with a name I'd never heard, but it read as if it might be true, and I couldn't rest without trying to find out whether it was or not. I'll show you the note to-night. It told me that Nellie Hall, 'whose mind I had shattered,' was in Kentucky, in a most desolate condition. Her mother was dead, her father was somewhere in the army, nobody knew where, and the people Nellie was with were tired of her and treated her very unkindly. I had just been getting ready to go into the army. Not that I was fired with any rebellious zeal, but I hadn't anything special to live for, and I felt something like a skulk. It was just about that time that a lot of our rich fellows were paying for substitutes. I couldn't get any money on the strength of

cotton, for we couldn't sell it, and I didn't have a cent in the world. If it was anybody's place to look after Nellie Hall, it was mine. Baker wanted a substitute just then. I took his money to use for poor Nellie. I would get to Kentucky and put her in some asylum and pay for her with Baker's money. I knew my name would ring in the county, and it has. I didn't have any difficulty finding her. The person that wrote the letter had given me directions enough. But I did have difficulty in finding an asylum. It was war times, and everything in the wildest disorder. They told me she was a troublesome inmate in any family. The slightest agitation threw her into one of those terrible commotions, such as you've just heard, although at other times she was just like a sweet, docile child of seven years old. I paid them to keep her when I was ordered off with my company.

"I had the devil's own luck in my first engagement, Hank; was taken prisoner. Had rather been shot outright. When they turned me loose on parole I traveled straight back to Kentucky to look after poor Nellie. Things had gone from bad to worse. The people had used my money and were tired of her altogether. Refused flatly to keep her any longer. What could I do? Money gone, that helpless

child on my hands; really a helpless child, but in appearance a beautiful young woman. I did the only thing I could do. Brought her here, hunted up my old Mammy, told her the whole story, and thanked God for the boon of her great mellow heart. As soon as things are settled I'll put her into an asylum. It will go hard with the poor little thing, for she is as happy as the day is long with her dolls and with Mammy and me. She is fond of me, Hank; think of it! Loves me as a child of seven years old would love a father who had been good to her always. Loves me—the creature who wrecked her life, and if I could I'd keep her always near me! Poor, poor little Nellie!"

He had told the whole story through bluntly and hurriedly, and now sat with his head resting on the tall back of his chair, in utter mental exhaustion.

"Why didn't you tell mother about it?" Henry White asked, breaking the long silence that followed upon Cap's hurried recital.

A bitter laugh was all the answer he got. He hung his head abashed. Perhaps Cap had heard of his mother's harsh restrictions. It was Cap's turn to comfort. He did it in his own fashion.

"Don't think I'm finding fault with anybody,

Hank, your mother least of all. There'd be small satisfaction in it. I know I'm held up to scorn in every household, and I've just got mule enough in me to make me rebel against explaining my position to everybody. I've sometimes sat in the gallery here alone, at night, without even a star to keep me company, and dreamed a foolish dream. I've thought of finding some good, sweet, strong woman who was made just to bless a home; and I've fancied myself loving her with the sort of perfect love that casts out fear and enables a man to bare all his life and his soul for inspection. And I've thought of telling her all about Nellie, after asking her to be my wife, and of hearing her speak brave, comforting words in which she has promised me to help and care for the child whose life I wrecked. Ah! I could worship a woman like that."

"If you could find her," said Henry, with bitter skepticism in his voice.

"I know a woman who would do that, and more too, for the man she loved," said Cap, in a resonant voice.

"Her name?"

"Amy Wilson."

CHAPTER VIII.

BRIARWOOD UNDER THE SUNSHINE.

IT was as if Nature had repented her of her dark mood and was bent upon making the sons of men oblivious of her stormy outburst, she wore such radiant smiles the next morning; and Briarwood received the full benefit of her joyous rebound.

At least Henry White thought so as he lazily opened his eyes and ears to the outer world once more. Through the one organ he saw the old place regilded; great bars of gold lying slantingly across the short grass whenever a crevice occurred in the tall cypress fence or fell in checkers through the leaves of the trees that bordered its eastern side. The ground was purple with the wreck of china-bloom that yesterday's storm had beaten eastward, and the clambering jessamine vine, which had grown so luxuriantly all these neglected years as to hide every vestige of the clumsy wooden trellis that had supported it in youth, flung its sweet yellow sprays across the window-sill of his bed-

room in refreshed beauty, holding still in its amber cups a few glittering raindrops. The balm of a thousand flowers was afloat on the fresh morning air. Through the other he caught the tuneful rivalry of a mocking-bird that swung in joyous freedom from the topmost tendrils of the yellow jessamine vine and pitted its voice against Nellie's caged canary, that was splitting its little throat with glad thanksgiving for the light of the world. Above the song of the mocking-bird and the canary rang the short, swift strokes of an ax almost beneath the bowed shutters of his bedroom. He looked out to see who it was that Cap admitted for this muscular exercise.

It was Cap himself, with no coat or vest or hat on, standing one foot planted on the long ash log, his broad chest heaving and falling with the swinging of his ax, whose shining blade flashed in the sunlight every second, sending the huge white ash chips scattering far and wide, only to be brought thriftily together again in Mammy's blue check apron, as, with bowed back but patient industry, she followed closely in the wake of the glittering ax.

"What a handsome fellow he is! He oughtn't to find it hard to win Amy Wilson," Henry said to himself, standing there behind the bowed window-shutter with the hair-brush

in his hand, "and it's a pity she can't know all about him and Nellie. They say the avenue to a woman's heart is most direct through her sympathies. Provided always that she has any."

At which idea he laughed aloud with that incipient skepticism which disappointed youth sets down as final and everlasting. He was thinking of Fanny Ray.

"When did you turn hewer of wood?" he asked later on, joining Cap out at the wood-pile, and obtained a precarious seat among the piled-up logs of wood.

"About the same time that I began to paddle my own canoe," Cap said, leaving the ax sticking in the log, while he hunted for a handkerchief to dry the clinging rings of hair on his wet forehead. "You see," he continued, "Mammy and I do it all inside the fence. We don't want any disturbing elements about Nellie, and free niggers are a very disturbing element."

"I should say so," said Henry, contemplatively breaking off a splinter to chew, while he pursued the subject. "And that brings us to the real object of my intrusion. I've got to cope with that very element, and don't know how to begin." "Don't call it intrusion, old boy." Cap flung his ax aside—he was quite sure Mammy had plenty of fuel to get break-

fast with—and took his seat beside Henry on a wood-pile. “I can’t say how much relief last night’s talk gave me. Poor little Nellie! you won’t see or hear anything more of her while you stay. She always sleeps late after Mammy’s has to give her a sedative. She’s a docile child always.”

He shook himself, as if by a physical effort putting away from him every gloomy reflection, and waved his hand with a broad sweep of his arms as he said cheerfully:

“You see the sun does shine, even on Briarwood.”

“And gloriously, too,” said Henry. “Such a day as this makes a fellow want to start his plows going, and all that, you know.”

“If he’s fortunate enough to have any plow to start,” said Cap, with a laugh.

“Haven’t you?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out as soon as Mammy gives us some breakfast. You’ve happened here on an important day for Briarwood. The contract is to be signed.”

“And what does it amount to?”

“Nothing; absolutely nothing, my dear boy. It is an imposing ceremony that imposes upon no one, but leaves the party of the first part and the party of the second part just about where it found them.”

"The problem with me is, how are we to live while we are getting things under headway—mother and I. You look pretty snug here behind your high palisades, but Whitefields has gone all to pieces. You see, mother's been the only white creature on the place for four years now, and they've made firewood of the fences right before her face, and killed the stock, and played the very deuce generally."

"No worse than on the places where there's been a man."

"The Wilsons seem to get along some way or other," Henry said, argumentatively.

"It's all owing to her." Cap rose suddenly from the stick of wood he had been resting on, and reached for his hat and vest that were hanging on a limb of a china tree near at hand. His face flushed suddenly, and there was a bright light in his eyes. "It hurts me," he said "to see such a heavy weight laid on a woman's shoulders and not be able to lift it. Miss Amy keeps the whole thing going, and the Major don't even know it.—Come, let's go into the garden and see if there's any radishes big enough to eat. I'd like you to enjoy the fruit of my industry. I make the garden myself nowadays, and Mammy pays me the highest compliment she can by saying I make as good a one as old Turner used to make. You re-

member Uncle Turner. He's pelted you and me out of his turnip patch many a time."

They had reached the garden by this time, and Cap walked straight toward the radish bed, with the directness of a man with a practical end to attain; but Henry, carried backward on the stream of time by the familiar old garden that had been the greatest charm of Briarwood to him in his boyish days, wandered away from him toward the fragrant violet borders that had always barred off the flowers from the vegetables. The borders were there still, but radical changes had been made in the ragged and irregular old flower-beds. There were trim, tiny little beds there now, intersected by short walks, and bright spring annuals were aflame in every corner.

"This is Nellie's garden," said Cap, coming up behind him, with his hands full of long crimson raidshes, to which the rich soil clung in brown flakes. "She spends some of her happiest hours out here. She likes to work in it herself, and she fancies she is the sole author of this brightness and bloom. Her pride in it is real pretty to see. Mammy and I never let her see us tending it. She spends the most of her time indoors with her dolls. It was fortunate for her that mother had locked away all of sister Annie's toys and dolls when she died. I don't

know what Nellie would have done without those dolls. Come in to breakfast; I see Mammy waving for us. We never ring a bell here; Nellie can't endure the sound of one."

He led the way out of the garden. He had grown tall and stalwart—so tall that he had to bend his head to pass under the old cedar trees that grew by the garden gate. There was something infinite touching to Henry in Cap Van Dorn's atonement. His strength was made subservient to Nellie's weakness, his rational desires yielded to her most irrational whims. In her helplessness she was strong, and in her feebleness she ruled him with autocratic severity. "It's all I can do for her," he said very frequently. It was a pathetic household that Briarwood sheltered in those days: a young man, with all the impatient longings and pulsing ambitions of his years ripe within him, bending uncomplainingly beneath the burden of a joyless seclusion, not even allowing himself to reflect upon the possibilities of his life if he could but order it for his own interest; a young girl happily unconscious that she was a burden to the friend whom she adored with the trusting affection of the childish years that were to be hers for all her earthly pilgrimage; and a faithful old negress hovering above them both with maternal tenderness and sleepless vigilance.

They stopped at the cistern between the house and the garden, and Cap held the radishes under the spout while Henry pumped the water over them.

"It takes me back to old times," said Van Dorn, looking up with his bright smile, "to see you at the pump-handle, Hank; but these are honester radishes than the ones we used to steal from Uncle Turner."

"I doubt," said Henry, dropping the pump-handle to help twist off the green tops of the rosy radishes, "if anything will ever again have the relish that all things had in those days."

"You're getting hungry," Cap said. "I know it by the tenor of your remarks. I always take my most melancholy views of life on an empty stomach. The future is a blank to the unfed."

Mammy had celebrated the unusual occurrence of company to breakfast by a grand culinary display, and the sun was a good deal higher overhead before the two men passed out through the gate in the tall fence, whose key Cap withdrew from the lock, and turned their steps toward the quarters, where all the new hands and Cap were to come to some sort of an agreement touching the year's crop.

"You see, I've got as much to boast of as you have in the way of wreckage," said Cap lightly, as they passed through the fenceless fields, by

the blackened heaps of the gin-house that had been burned by orders of the military, up through the quarter lot where cabins without front steps, cabins with no chimneys, and cabins in every conceivable stage of degeneracy swarmed with a motley crowd of strange tenants, who had come from no one knew whither, with no definite object in life but to get close to some white man who would feed them for the possibility of a return in labor.

"How are you off for teams," Cap asked, with neighborly interest, the question doubtless being suggested by the disreputable appearance of a blue-bodied wagon, guiltless of one hind wheel, that impeded their progress just then.

"Three mules and one dumping-cart," Henry answered, curtly.

"Which is vastly better than three carts and no mules. That's my fix. That's the reason I'll have to make easy terms with these fellows. The most of them have mules. Stolen, doubtless, but one can't afford to inquire into the antecedents of every mule that feeds at his corn-crib these days. Who are your merchants?" was the next question in his catechism.

"Haven't any yet, but I suppose there'll be no difficulty on that score."

"None whatever. It's simply a matter of

self-preservation with the commission merchants. They can't exist without our cotton, and we can't make cotton without their assistance. They'll advance you all you need to run the place: pork and meal and corn."

"And what is mother to exist on? I can't feed her on corn as I would the work-mules."

"I know of one way to make a little ready money," said Cap reflectively, "and not such a bad way either, if you'll pocket your pride."

"I haven't any to pocket. I'd turn stoker if anybody would employ me."

"I don't think they would," said Cap, discouragingly, slowly passing his hand along Henry's arm. "You haven't got the muscle. I would like to have taken hold of this thing myself, but I couldn't leave Nellie. It's rather confining."

"What is it? Don't be afraid."

"It's keeping the toll-gate on the plank road. It's close to you there. The plank road is a good source of revenue to its projectors, and I know they're on the lookout for an honest man. But then Miss Ray might object. The position is not one of aristocratic exclusiveness, you know."

This was not his first attempt to bring the conversation around to Fanny Ray. He was at a loss to understand Henry's dumbness on

the subject. Why should they not talk about Fanny? He very seldom went out to Baldy's Point of late, unless urgent business compelled, and when he did no one volunteered to post him in local gossip. He was under a cloud wherever he went, and was fully aware of it. Henry's reply, which came quite deliberately, left him as much in the dark as ever.

"I'll risk disapproval. What does it pay? It's worth looking into."

"I think so myself"—they had reached the dark crowd about the overseer's house gallery by this time—"and if you'll wait until I've expended all my wisdom on these enlightened sons of labor I'll tell you all I know about it."

Henry waited, locating himself a little apart from the master of Briarwood, who, with the verbose and confusing contract, over which he had expended so much brain effort, spread out on the table before him, applied himself to the stupendous task of evolving order from chaos.

Stupendous, indeed, where the contracting parties represented on the one side a mass of dense ignorance, distrust, inexperience, and thriftlessness; on the other, inexperience, youth, and bewilderment. Cap read through the long series of agreements on the part of the parties of the first part (who were numerous and stolid)

and the party of the second part, in a slow, clear voice, carefully eliminating all the large words as he proceeded. The parties of the first part knitted their dark brows sagely and exchanged wise glances of caution with each other. They were free now, and they owed it to themselves to see that no white man got the better of them just because he could "figger" and they could not. The parties of the first part outnumbered the party of the second part forty to one, so the balance of wisdom must be on their side. There were women there, with babies in their arms and tired little toddlers clinging to their ragged skirts, who were "going to have their own say" in this matter. There were quiet, age-bowed men there, to whom freedom had come too late to possess any stirring power. They missed the fostering care that had sheltered them all through life, and the old eyes that were fastened on the young face of the contractor were full of wistful inquiry concerning the future. There were youths there to whom the few years since emancipation meant all of life, and who found it difficult yet to discriminate between liberty and license. There was strength and feebleness, docility and ferocity, good-natured acceptance and dark distrust, all elbowing each other about the small table where, erect and outwardly composed, the

young master of Briarwood faced them, with the depressing inner consciousness that upon this turbulent, restless, untrustworthy mob he must depend for his subsistence weighing heavily upon him.

He finished reading the contract amid a distinct buzz of discontent.

The murmur was taken up, and swelled into a loud protest. Perhaps only a small proportion of them knew the original cause of dissatisfaction. It was conveyed to them by one of the younger men who faced angrily toward the crowd about the gallery.

"Van Dorn's contrac' promises to give us one third uv all de cott'n we makes, folks. Mr. Dempsy Bass, jus' back yhere two miles, he promises his folks one-fo'th. Them that likes the figger three better'n they does the figger fo' kin stay whar they's a mind to. Es fur me en my squad, we'll try the one-fo'th man. Come on, Lindy."

He shouldered his way violently through the crowd, calling to his own immediate family to follow. They all needed a leader of some sort; must have one, indeed. They were a lot of blind children groping their way along an untried road.

In less than five minutes Van Dorn and his guest were entirely alone on the gallery. The

unsigned contract lay on the table between them. They looked at each other disgustedly. Then the ludicrousness of the situation came uppermost, and they laughed boisterously.

"What will they do now?" Henry asked, turning his gaze in the direction of the retreating crowd. They were more of a novelty to him than to Cap. "Will they go to Mr. Dempsy Bass's?"

"Perhaps so, perhaps not," said Cap, folding up the rejected contract; "more likely they will sit down again in my quarters for another week to talk about it, while I feed them, until they make up their minds, or think they have made them up. Let it go for to-day. I want to talk to you about that toll-gate business."

CHAPTER IX.

A PROVOST MARSHAL'S REIGN.

BALDY'S POINT was in a state of violent commotion. In point of fact, that was coming to be the normal condition of what was, usually, an abnormally serene locality. So many unprecedented things were happening within its sleepy purlieus, mostly things of such an unpleasant description as to cause Mrs. Judge Baker to say: "It really did seem as if the war had just begun instead of having just ended." Which was virtually true so far as the non-combatants of Baldy's Point were concerned.

There was the Provost Marshal, to begin with. He was decidedly the most unpleasant thing that had happened for a long time, and a thing altogether without a precedent.

When it first became known that a Provost Marshal was established at the Mimms House, people looked at each other stupidly and asked "what he was there for." Some were even so very ignorant as to inquire what a Provost Marshal was. The more knowing ones defined

him so glibly as to arouse suspicion of recent consultation with the dictionary. These declared that a provost was a sort of inferior judge who took cognizance of civil causes. The linguist of Baldy's Point declared the word to be of French origin, and was really quite fluent in the matter of roots and derivations, but his erudition went for naught. Nobody seemed to care anything about the origin of the word. It was the man who wore it as a sort of insignia of office that excited their liveliest interest. The combination of the words provost and marshal had a military ring about it, and the people of Baldy's Point were sick nigh unto death of the very name of military anything. There had been a tremendous revulsion of feeling since the time, just a little over four years before, when they had sent their military forth with a great fanfare of trumpets and a superb recklessness in the matter of flowers and predictions. The result had been disappointing.

What the real official duties of the Provost Marshal who was stationed at Baldy's Point might have been closely and clearly defined to be will never be known. Perhaps he was meant for a beneficent institution during those chaotic days when there was neither judge nor jury qualified to act intelligently in the small-

est matter of dispute, and at a time when hordes of newly emancipated slaves were tentatively trying to discover for themselves the full meaning and scope of the large liberty that had suddenly been intrusted to their ignorant keeping.

What his duties practically proved to be would have worn Atlas himself to a skeleton, but the people of Baldy's Point had no sympathy to spare for the man who was to all intents and purposes "put over them." Happily for himself and the country, the Provost Marshal proved to be an ephemeral expedient.

The one under which Baldy's Point groaned temporarily did not suggest the ephemera personally. On the contrary, he had the very solidest and most permanent appearance physically. "Not bad looking," was the reluctant verdict of the men who gathered in diminished numbers on Sellers's gallery those days. The new official was compelled to walk three or four times a day by this inquisitorial as he went to and from the Mimms House to his office in the Court-house.

Decidedly not bad looking. On the contrary, handsome; with a striking military carriage and a well-set head, and a pair of keen gray eyes that rested placidly on the group of men on the gallery as he passed them, ready to

accept any token of civility that might unexpectedly be accorded him, but not at all pressing his claims in that direction.

But they were sore and moody, these men, smarting under defeat, and, beyond the scant courtesy of a bow, were not inclined toward conciliation. He represented the power under whose triumphant hand they lay vanquished and helpless.

It was before him, the Government's accredited representative, that every man of them who would be reinstated to his rights of citizenship must appear as a suppliant and ask pardon for the deeds done in the spirit of rebellion in the years just gone by.

New ideas must have to grow before their intrinsic value becomes perceptible (in which respect they somewhat resemble new potatoes), and the idea that they had all been plunging blindly toward an abyss from which Providence had hurled them backward, bruised, bleeding, exhausted, but saved, had not yet even sprouted in the brains of the men of Baldy's Point.

That the Provost Marshal had a name which was his own, and not government property, everybody knew, for the post-office was kept on one counter in Sellers's store, in the notion department. It consisted of a box full of pigeon-holes, open in front and behind, so that

every man might help himself to his own mail without "bothering" Sellers or his one clerk to leave off the drawing of a quart of molasses or the measuring of a dress pattern of calico. No one, of course, ever saw or cared to see the contents of any pigeon-hole but his own, but every one knew that the Provost's name was Wesley Ford, and that he received a lot of letters by every mail. But this private name was practically useless to its possessor for the time being. He had no social existence for Baldy's Point.

Another one of the disagreeable things over which Baldy's Point was in a state of fermentation was the remarkable stand Henry White had taken. It was "possible for people to be genteel, even if they were wrecked all to pieces"; and yet there he was, turned toll-gate keeper, actually sitting in a little, miserable sentry box, a sort of rain shelter merely, and taking the toll from every passer-by with as stolid a face as if he had been born and reared in that coop he spent the day in! Mrs. White was "perfectly wretched" about it. And it was said he actually took his dinner with him in a tin pail, like any common laborer. Mrs. White said he had gotten some nonsense in his head about paying as he went, and he was going to get the commission merchants to supply his

hands but not himself. What a perfectly absurd position for a young man who had been brought up as Henry White had!

Some people said it was moroseness, that the breaking off of his engagement with Fanny Ray had something to do with it. But that theory did not hold good in face of the man at the toll-gate; he did not look morose, only quietly determined to do without flinching what he had undertaken to do. He had a lot of books in the shanty, and writing material, and as he was almost within sight of the front gate at Whitefields, it was no great undertaking, the coming down or the going back. But Mrs. Judge Baker's voice was against the whole proceeding, and consequently all Baldy's Point decried it. It had a leveling tendency, and anything that tended toward obliteration of the old social lines was to be discouraged. Henry White's unreasonable conduct, and the daily doings and sayings of the Provost, were about as much as Baldy's Point could cope with at one time. At least, that was the general impression until, one day, it was surprised into the knowledge of its own greater capacity for excitement.

The Provost, it was reported, had called at Judge Ray's, asked for Miss Ray, and been received!

There was absolutely nothing now left for Fanny Ray to do to insure the uncorking of all the vials of wrath and the emptying of their contents upon her reckless head. What were Judge and Mrs. Ray thinking of to permit such a thing? Hadn't Fanny done enough already, in that matter of cruel treatment of Henry White, to disenchant all her old friends? Why should she fly in the face of the community in this manner? Mrs. Baker voiced the whole neighborhood in querulous inquiry. Disenchant was the word. The Judge's daughter had been a sort of local queen before these troublous times; so daintily pretty, so saucily self-assertive, so winsome in her affectionate out-going to all her friends. But she had changed a good deal in the months that had come and gone since her cruel reception of her unrecognized lover, and only when she mounted her spirited little mare for a lovely little canter through the woods was she seen away from home of late or did she seem at all like the old Fanny. She had grown to be very cold and distant and indifferent to everybody, which made it all the more incomprehensible why the Provost Marshal should have felt warranted in calling at the Judge's home and asking to see Miss Ray alone. There was no getting around the fact he had done so, for the

Rays' Mollie, who opened the door to him and carried the message to Miss Fanny, passed by Mrs. Baker's five minutes later on her way to Sellers's store to get a pound of bicarbonate of soda, and stopped to tell Mrs. Baker's Phemy, who was leaning over the front gate with the front door mat in her hand, which she was going to beat against the gate-post after a while. Mrs. Baker shook her head solemnly when Phemy told her about it a trifle triumphantly, and secretly hoped that Mrs. Ray would be able to explain it away. It was that same afternoon that Mrs. Baker found she had entirely forgotten the new stitch in double crochet that Mrs. Ray had taught her, and she went over to take another lesson from her. Everything looked as quiet as usual at the Judge's. The Rays' was one of the few homes at Baldy's Point that had not a decidedly war-scarred aspect. Mrs. Ray was out on the back gallery, superintending the building of a feed coop for her young chickens. The Judge was there, too, with his spectacles pushed far up on his bald forehead; apparently he was superintending Mrs. Ray and the builder of the coop. Fanny she had seen as she passed by the parlor door, sitting at the piano with a long trail of pink muslin lying all round the piano stool. How slim and white her neck looked coming

up from its pink frills! She made Mrs. Baker think of an azalea, there was something so purely transparent about her cheeks and her extremely pretty ears, behind which her hair was pushed with utter indifference to effect. Nothing coarse or sordid had ever forced itself upon the Judge's daughter for consideration, and if the two doting old people out on the gallery there could help it, it never should. She was all that was left them out of a large family of children, and hence was the recipient of much injudicious indulgence. Mrs. Baker found out a good deal during that visit. She found out how to make that double stitch in crochet. She found out the very best way to make a chicken coop so that the young chickens could partake of their rations unmolested by voracious feathered adults; she found out that the hands on Henry White's place were in a state of absolute mutiny, because he would not include whisky among his supplies; she found out that Amy Wilson had actually turned dressmaker for the people on the Wilson place, and was wearing herself out rising early in the morning and sewing late at night, to keep the Major from finding out what she was about. She found out that Cap Sutton had the best prospect of anybody in the county for a full working force, since he had changed his contract

from one-third to one-fourth of the crop (which had occasioned much triumph in his quarters); she found out, in short, a little about every one of her neighbors, and rejoiced or regretted as the character of the information demanded; but what she did not find out was why the Provost Marshal had called on Fanny Ray and why Fanny Ray had received him instead of the Judge, who evidently had been about the house all day, for here he was late in the afternoon still in his house slippers, and his neck was guiltless of a cravat. She stepped into the parlor on her way back toward the front gate after an hour's stay. Fanny got up respectfully and inquired solicitously after the dear old lady's health, looking at her very sweetly with those great innocent eyes of hers. But Mrs. Baker left the house feeling baffled.

The entire Ray family escorted her hospitably to the front steps; the Judge in his slippers, that slapped the floor noisily at every footfall, Mrs. Ray with her hand full of ten-penny nails that she had gathered up thriftily to put back in the tool-chest, and Fanny in her trailing pink organdy, that was a trifle out of date, but immensely becoming to her delicate style of beauty.

"Poor old lady!" Fanny said, with a low laugh, as the gate closed on Mrs. Baker. "I

hate to inflict unnecessary suffering, but she couldn't be trusted."

"No, indeed," said Mrs. Ray, in fervent acquiescence; "it would never have done in the world."

"As it is," said Fanny indifferently, "all Baldy's Point will share her pangs before night."

The Rays' house overlooked the Court-house Square, so that every movement of any importance that agitated the little town was apt to fall directly under their supervision. As they stood there they saw a saddled horse led across the square by the boy who acted as hostler at the Mimms House on the rare occasions when there was need for such a functionary. He hitched it to a ring in a tree just outside the Court-house yard, and left it there.

"I do believe he is a man of his word," said Fanny, surprisedly. An interested look had come into her languid eyes at sight of the horse and man, and now she stood there watching for the sequel. She turned away with a satisfied air when, after a little while, the Provost came out from his office, and, mounting, rode away at a brisk gait.

"He rides well," said the Judge, bringing his glasses into position to look after the young

man; "and I suppose it was necessary. But deuce take me if I don't wish it could have been managed otherwise. It's a bitter pill. It looks like surrendering twice over."

"I know it is," said Fanny, standing before him and smoothing the wrinkles out of his forehead with two little slim fingers, "and that was the reason I would not let you have anything to do with it. I told him, truthfully, that you knew nothing of my intention; and I told him, also, that he must name his price."

"What did he say to that?" the Judge asked quickly.

"Looked black and turned red," Fanny said, with her slow, lazy laugh, "and said he would name his price when he had earned it, and I'm quite sure he will."

"Look here, Fanny"—the Judge laid his heavy hands on her shoulders—"let there be no mistake on that fellow's part, nor on yours either. If he thinks that because you've found it necessary to make use of him you are going to open this house to him as a visitor, he's mistaken, that's all. He's a handsome dog, but—"

"And you are a very foolish papa," said Fanny, dropping her arms from his neck languidly and turning away from him with a frown.

"Don't cross her, Judge," said Mrs. Ray imploringly; "it don't take anything these days to give her a turn. She looks like wax now."

And the Judge meekly promised to be very circumspect.

CHAPTER X.

THE PROVOST'S ERRAND.

WHEN the Provost Marshal rode out of town that morning, followed by a good many curious glances and wondering conjectures, it was not of the girl standing there on the Judge's gallery that he was thinking, or, at least, if it was, it was only for a very little while. He took note of her presence there, cuddled close up to her father's side, and said to himself that she looked like some delicate wild-flower growing close up to the roots of a gnarly old oak, the physical contrast between the two was so great, and he smiled slightly to think that she should be watching him to see if he did what he had promised her to do.

"You haven't much confidence in me yet, little girl," he said, under his breath, as the bridle path brought him close enough to necessitate the lifting of his hat to the Rays, "but I bide my time."

It occurred to him that Miss Ray had shown considerable independence in doing what she had done that morning, and he honored her for

it. The more he analyzed it the more distinctly difficult to do it appeared to him. He thought he knew of only one other woman who could have done an awkward thing with so much grace.

When he did stop to think of it he saw her coming swiftly toward him where he sat stiffly enough in the parlor of her quaint old home, amid the materialized fancies and traditions of several generations of Rays. He was glad to think the accumulated treasures of that stuffy old room had escaped 'harm. If he had not been there simply on sufferance, he would have liked to inquire into the history of some of the curious things that crowded the tables and the étagères and the broad, low mantel-shelf. But Miss Ray had come quite promptly, and had looked at him inquisitorially for a second with pure searching eyes, as if she wanted to decide for herself what manner of man he might be, and then, with singular straightforwardness, but not without a tremor in her girlish voice, had told him why she had sent for him; had told him how she had a very dear old lady friend, who was a widow, and whose only son had very foolishly leased his place out to the hands, and had gone to keeping a toll-gate; and how somebody had told her that her dear old lady friend was in great distress because of certain threats

she had heard made against her son, at which he only laughed; and of how she, Fanny Ray, having heard that he, the Provost, could do just what he pleased with the freedmen, had sent to request him to use his influence with the people out at Whitefields. How prettily she had flushed, as, twisting her handkerchief into a rope, she had gone on nervously: "Of course you understand, Mr. Provost, that I am doing this entirely unsolicited. No one, not even papa, knows that I wrote a note asking you to come over here. But—but Mrs. White's son is such an exceedingly obstinate young man that he would let them kill him before he would yield a point, and—and—that would be so very sad for poor Mrs. White, you know."

"To have her son killed, you mean?" This with a grave smile.

"Yes," said Fanny, giving one more nervous twist to her tortured handkerchief, as she veiled her pleading eyes under down-dropped lids.

"Quite so. But I don't imagine things are that bad," he had said, and had informed her that his practice was to receive formal complaints from employer or employed at his office.

"But Hen—Mrs. White will never complain. And I—I want to engage you to go out there."

"You mean," he had said, "looking black and turning red," as she had truthfully reported, "that you wish to pay me to go out to your friend's plantation as a sort of regulator."

"Yes, just exactly," she had said, very eagerly, evidently pleased with his ready grasp of her idea, and he had told her stiffly he would name his price later on, and had terminated the interview somewhat abruptly. And here he was actually going on the errand she had sent him about. It occurred to him that these Southern women had a rather cool way of ordering men to do their bidding, and he was to a degree surprised at his own docility. But he said, searching for an excuse for himself, this widow's case does sound rather forlorn. He was too entirely outside the social circle of life at Baldy's Point to have ever heard the story of Fanny Ray and Henry White. If the owner of this Whitefields place was a woman, and alone, perhaps his merely riding through the quarters and speaking a few quieting words to the malcontents might mend matters for her. It was worth a trial.

"For Ann's sake," it occurred to him, he would like very much to make a friend of the Judge's daughter. "Ann" was the Provost's wife, and he was very much in love with her. Too much in love with her to subject her to

pain when it could possibly be avoided. And then, in his vision of fair women, the Provost turned from the review of his visit to Fanny Ray to welcome a demure little image that was seldom out of his thoughts. "She's as plucky as Julius Cæsar," he said to himself, *not* thinking of Fanny Ray, "but this sort of thing would break her down in a month." He did not specify what this sort of thing might mean. Fanny Ray's good will, once he should have earned it, opened up a possible avenue of happiness. The Rays occupied a social eminence that no one had ever disputed. Whoever they indorsed, the people of Baldy's Point accepted without question. And the Provost Marshal was inwardly resolved that they should indorse his wife. That was the price he was going to put on his extra services in behalf of that lonely old lady out at Whitefields whose case excited Miss Ray's sympathy so warmly. The Provost was young, and this, their first separation, was hard on Ann as well as himself, and, as his fancy traveled much faster than the hired nag that paced dejectedly through the wooded road between Baldy's Point and Whitefields, he had selected a building spot and erected a pretty Queen Anne cottage on it, and trained a Lamarque rose all over its front porch (he loved these rich, luxuriant climbing

roses; Ann had never seen anything like them up there in Vermont), furnished his home from parlor to kitchen, and eaten several satisfactory meals in its pretty little dining-room (which was to overlook a bed of tuberose and gladioli), with Ann sitting opposite him in a white dress with Southern roses in her belt (it was always blossoming time in the Provost's fancy), long before he reached that portion of the plank road where were the gate and the shanty in which Henry White had elected to begin his career as a bread-winner. The dull thud of his horse's lazy hoof-beats upon the plank road had formed a sort of accompaniment to this pleasant reverie. The horse knew the road so very much better than he did that his hold upon the bridle had been merely nominal. The animal's sudden stoppage was meant merely to inform his rider that they had reached the toll-gate and common honesty demanded a halt, but it shattered the Provost's reverie and sent his vision of Ann and the Lamarque roses and the pretty dining-room spinning, bringing him back with a jerk to the errand Fanny Ray had sent him on. He looked up and drew a long inspiration of astonishment. Coming toward him from his seat by the little table, which was scarcely more than a plank knocked up against the side of a venerable

spreading sycamore tree, was a young man who certainly did not suggest the typical toll-gate keeper. The Provost's surprise was so extreme he would really have liked to whistle. He wondered if Miss Ray hadn't made a serious mistake in supposing that this broad-shouldered fellow, with his clear, fearless eyes and square, resolute under-jaw, was not quite equal to taking care of himself, his plantation, and his mother too, without any outside interference. But the girl had said his life was threatened, and he only laughed at the threats. He recalled the intense look of anxiety in her eye as she had told him that. Her interest in the old lady out at Whitefields had suddenly become altogether explicable. It certainly would be a pity for this fine-looking young fellow to come to grief for want of a friendly warning. But would he take that friendly warning from him? That remained to be seen.

"Mr. White, I believe," he said, feeling in his vest-pocket for the toll, which Henry stolidly pocketed with a curt—

"That is my name."

The Provost dismounted. There was no use waiting for an invitation, even if the keeper could have divined his intention. He felt dubious about riding on through the gate and over the Whitefields place without previous

parley with its owner. What he had meant for a kindness to an old lady might be mistaken for an impertinence by a young man. He had a mistake lodged in his brain about this toll-gate keeper, and had concluded he was either a lazy drone who preferred this sluggish sitting at receipt of custom to the most arduous duties of the plantation, or else he was a man broken in health by the war and unfit for anything more active. Whether or not Fanny Ray was responsible for this error he could not decide.

The Provost was not a timorous man, and, having made up his mind that it was the thing to do to talk plainly to the master of Whitefields, he went at it boldly enough, helping himself to a seat on the cypress block by Henry's table under the sycamore. There was a great litter of cypress splinters all around the sycamore tree, and a small pile of clumsily made shingles near them. A glittering draw-knife rested on the cleft of another block of cypress close by the one on which he had seated himself. He glanced swiftly from the draw-knife to Henry White's hands. It was pathetic. But he admired him all the more for it.

"I hope you won't look upon me as an intermeddler, Mr. White," he began, somewhat hurriedly, "but the truth is, I was about to take a ride over your place."

"It's not much to look at," said Henry, flushing hotly but keeping his voice well under control, "but doubtless you'd find a good many there to welcome you." This with cool sarcasm.

It was the Provost's turn to grow red, but he was not easily turned from a purpose once formed.

"You won't mind my saying that I've heard there's a good deal of dissatisfaction on your place, and I'd like to help mend matters if you'll permit me."

"I suppose there's plenty of dissatisfaction on every place," Henry answered bluntly, stooping over to pick up one of his rough shingles to use his pocket-knife on. "I'm only on the place at night and very early in the morning, but I didn't know things had come to such a pitch as to demand your intervention."

"It scarcely amounts to intervention," said the Provost, equably; "I only aimed at prevention."

"Prevention of what?" Henry pushed his broad-brimmed straw hat far back on his head and fixed his eyes coldly on the Provost.

"Prevention of harm to you. You are not unaware of threats—"

"No. I am not unaware of them. What then?"

Wesley Ford leaned forward earnestly: "I implore you not to rebuff me. Whether it is right or wrong that I should have gained such an influence over these ignorant creatures, you know that I have it. I will serve you, if you will let me."

"The best service you can render the neighborhood will be to run some of these fellows out of the country. They are fire-brands. As for the rest, I'm quite capable of managing my own place, thank you."

"Would you mind giving me the names of the men you consider at the bottom of these local disturbances?"

"Not at all. Henry Robinson—"

"Wait a moment, please." The Provost felt in his pocket for his memorandum book, only to find it was not there, fumbled for a piece of paper, and finally found he was reduced to using the blank page of a letter which he drew from its envelope, laying the latter on the little table by his hat. "Henry Robinson," he repeated, using his pencil rapidly.

"Daniel Forman," said Henry, briskly.

"Daniel Forman down."

"And Peter Johnson. They are the three men who are perpetually inciting the rest to revolt, and who have given expression to a lot of rubbish. If I were to attend to all the stuff

I hear from the quarters, I'd have no time to attend to anything else."

(A strong puff of wind sent the Provost's hat spinning on the table and swept the envelope out of sight among the litter of the cypress splinters and shingles at his feet. He put the hat on his head for security, but gave no thought to the empty envelope.)

"And you've no objection whatever to my visiting your quarters?"

"It's a matter of no moment whatever," said Henry icily, "only you are not to permit them to think you come as a mediator between me and them. I've taken a stand that I mean to maintain if the stars fall."

The Provost put his written list back into his pocket. He had no desire to argue this young man out of any of his convictions. He was a long way from Baldy's Point and the day was dying fast. It was gloomy enough out there by the toll-gate after the sun set. In fact, long before its last rays faded from the tallest tree-tops the shrill cry of the cicadas filled the air, and the loud drone of the insects smote on the stillness, and myriad black-winged bats came out of the hollows of the trees and circled close overhead, searching for their suppers in mid-air. The Provost shivered slightly

as he stood up to go, and buttoned his coat across his chest.

"Don't you find it deucedly dismal here all day?"

"It's not especially cheerful," said Henry, in a tone that discouraged further discussion of his private affairs. And then the Provost turned toward his horse, who had bitten off all the sassafras shoots within his reach, and was now eying him in a mildly disapproving way.

"It is so late that I think I shall wait until to-morrow," he said, as he sprang into the saddle.

"As you please," Henry answered indifferently, and turned toward his shanty to gather up the dinner-pail and the books which came with him and went with him to and from the house every day. The gleam of something white on the ground near where the Provost had been sitting caught his eye as he came out again from the shelter. He stooped to pick it up. It was the empty envelope. There was something strangely familiar in the formation of the letters in that superscription. He looked at it fixedly. Once upon a time that handwriting had been very familiar indeed. He might possibly be mistaken; so many women wrote just alike. It was a hand-delivered letter; there was no stamp on it. He turned the envelope over. He thought he

knew beforehand what he should find on the flap. The letters F. M. R. were inextricably entangled on it; not inextricably to him, however. Each letter stared him in the face in cruel confirmation of the fact that Fanny Ray had found occasion to communicate by letter with the Provost Marshal, whom all her old friends held in such base disesteem.

He sat there for a long time staring at the envelope that told so much that it was a pity it could not have told more. He was conscious of a dull sort of surprise at himself. He thought he had gotten entirely over his fancy for this girl, who had flinched from his side when he needed her the most. He didn't believe he would have cared a rush if any of the other boys had won her brittle affections; but this—this was too much. He sat there pondering over the bitterness of it until the cicadas wearied of their shrill calling to each other, and the flutter of bats' wings grew louder and closer, and the distant lowing of the cows grew nearer and nearer, and the occasional hoot of an owl mingled with the other voices of the night, and the stars came out overhead, and the day was dead.

Then he got up and turned his face toward the house reluctantly. He wished he could sit there till he felt stronger. "But mother

will be worrying," he muttered, peevishly. He felt so old and tired to-night, so inexpressibly weary of everything. What was he struggling for, anyhow?

As he passed out of sight beyond the toll-gate, a man came from around the corner of the shanty and followed slowly in the same path. He was a powerful negro; so dark of hue and carelessly outlined in his shabby clothes that he was but indistinctly defined against the gloomy background of the trees.

His ax was slung over his shoulder, and on its helve swung the tin dinner-pail that he had taken with him that morning when he went to his rail-splitting. His head was swaying angrily from side to side, and occasionally his powerful fist was raised and shaken in the direction of the receding form.

"So mine was the fust name. Henry Robinson heads the list, do he, boss? Well, w'en dey runs me off'n dis place it will be fur somethin'; en you won' git much satisfacshun out'n it."

He laughed aloud, and an owl, overhearing, answered him with a shrill screech of diabolical mirth.

CHAPTER XI.

HENRY MAKES AN ENEMY.

THE hours which Henry White spent in the shanty by the toll-gate were by no means his most unhappy ones. There was an element of peace and quietness in his life there which entered into it nowhere else, and which was a veritable balm of healing to the inward soreness that plagued him yet. Strictly speaking, his days were spent at the shanty, not in it. It was scarcely more than a place of refuge for him and his books when it rained.

The great sycamore tree that spread its branches over an immense area, sheltering the shanty as it sheltered everything else that came within its radius, sheltered him also, and under its outstretched arms he worked and read and projected and—remembered. Worked, with stubborn revolution and awkward zeal, at the tough cypress blocks out of which the pile of clumsy shingles was so slowly evolved. He had a boundless contempt for those shingles of his own making. They were to re-roof the old house with, and he rather dreaded the

moment when they should come for the first time under his mother's critical observation. "She's so used to the old ways," he said to himself, excusing her while he eyed an especially uneven shingle with a scowl of disapproval, "that she can't seem to make allowance." But the old roof leaked badly, and after these shingles, which he was making with his own red and blistered hands, were actually nailed on, he supposed the result would be as satisfactory as if they had been turned out by experts. Read, with divided attention and wandering mind, the books that had been his delight and refreshment in the old times, but over whose classic pages now there was thrown the dark tissue of each day's bewildering condition for his mental distraction. Projected idle plans for the future, which were principally noticeable for their lack of firm foundation and as proofs of youth's incurable propensity to try to bend fate to its will. Remembered—well, principally he remembered his defeat in love and war. But, as he pertinaciously refused to look backward, it was only at occasional periods of spiritual lassitude that Memory, getting the better of Resolution temporarily, used the lash mercilessly.

Against the huge trunk of the sycamore, with its blotch of white and brown bark, he had

nailed the semicircular boards that served him as dinner-table, writing-desk, and tool-chest. Through the green canopy of broad leaves he could look up to the deep blue sky and soar above the clumsy shingles and the wearisome plantation accounts and all things mean and small for a second at a time, which was clear gain. In its branches the birds of the air rested and twittered and caroled, and had come to look upon him as such an innocuous specimen of humanity that they consented affably to partake of his luncheon, even contending with really human acrimony over the crumbs that fell from his table. In return for this casual refreshment they sang for him. And to the man so lately come from the din of artillery and the rattle of musketry and the shock of arms, the sweet, inconsequent, fragmentary notes that sifted from myriad bird-throats down through the interlacing leaves of the sycamore were inexpressibly pleasing. The birds were never disappointing, he said to himself. Yes, it was very pleasant down there at the shanty, and he was never especially glad when the sun dropped low enough to send golden shafts of light slanting through its lowest branches to illumine the rough exterior of the shanty, and the violet-tinted vistas of the woods turned to black, and mystical shapes and

shadows danced therein. He could not feel especially glad, for then he must go back to the home and hear from his mother every little detail that had annoyed her throughout the day. And there was always a great deal to annoy her these days, and she was unsparing of detail. He thought he had done the very best he could when he leased the place out to the hands and "turned in" to make personal expenses at the toll-gate. But she differed with him. Mrs. White differed with almost everybody in those bewildering days. She differed with fate primarily, and all the rest followed as a matter of course.

The keeping of the toll-gate only lasted from sun to sun. Travel to and from Baldy's Point was not so brisk but that the gate could be locked at nightfall and opened again at sunrise. The plank-road was an institution that had been necessitated by the impossibility of landing cotton over the impassable swamp roads. It was principally used for teams and vehicles, and no teams or vehicles were apt to want to traverse the impenetrable woods in which it terminated six miles beyond Whitefields without the light of the sun to guide them. This being the case, Henry White had a few hours of every day and evening to devote to the affairs of the plantation.

His mother was untiring in her vigilant espionage of the "new people" in the cabins, between whom and herself there was no bond save that of self-interest. Henry sometimes wondered if she did not expend all her energy in garnering up complaints against them. On this special evening he almost prayed that he might find things quiet up at the house. He did not feel sure of himself. That envelope, addressed to the Provost Marshal in Fanny Ray's handwriting, was lying in his inside coat pocket over his heart. He marveled at the tumult in his blood which it had excited.

"Anybody but her!" he said over and over again, as he strode toward the house. "An accursed interloper—our enemy—she's insulted the whole community by having anything to do with him."

He was quite sure he was no longer in love with her himself. Oh, no! If there was anything he was sure of, it was that. He walked very slowly toward the house; he knew of no special reason why he should hurry home. Things had improved somewhat at Whitefields since that day when he had staggered up the broken brick-walk, unrecognizable in his tatters, toward where his mother and Fanny Ray sat watching him. He had himself patched up the fence and cut down the weeds

and replaced the broken bricks with whole ones, followed about by his mother uttering little ejaculations of despair and plaintive protests against the evil days she had lived to see. He had improved a good deal himself, in many ways. But they were all new ways.

Mrs. White herself could never be brought to admit that anything at all was improved at Whitefields.

"We are going from bad to worse, son, every day," was the melancholy formula with which she generally wet-blanketed any cheerful prophecy for the future he might venture upon.

"How could she help repining?" she asked, in angry response to some very distinct pricks from her own conscience. "Henry was all she had in the world. She loved him better than she did all the world put together. He was actually demeaning himself to the ranks of a day laborer, and she was expected to look on and smile approvingly, which was asking her to turn monster." That was one view of the situation. She looked at him with an anxious gaze this evening, as he came heavily toward her with his shotgun resting on his shoulder and his dinner-pail swung across its muzzle. How extremely listless his entire aspect! And how deliberate his steps!

It was almost as if he came toward her reluctantly. Mrs. White sometimes had intuitions, but she did not always profit by them.

"You are late, son," said she, in her sweet, plaintive voice, standing at the head of the steps to meet him.

"A little," he answered, taking off his hat as he stooped to give her the kiss she had always exacted at his goings out and comings in; "but you haven't been worrying about me, I hope."

"I'm always doing that," she said, with unsmiling veracity, "but it doesn't seem to mend matters much. It all passes for a weak woman's unreasonableness. I suppose I am foolish."

He moved silently on into the hall, where he stood his shotgun up in the corner by his rifle and placed his tin pail on the hat-rack. The hat-rack was one of the few ante-bellum articles of furniture at Whitefields that had not gone to ruin. It was an absurdly large affair of carved rosewood, with marble slabs, and beveled mirrors, and lacquered sea-shells to hold dripping umbrellas, and all the rest of it. Henry's battered tin pail, with the top crushed in, was offensively duplicated in the plate-glass mirror. It was as if Mrs. White was being reminded twice over of her son's descent to the

ranks of the day laborer. She took it up with a significant little twitch, and, holding it rather unnecessarily far from her, moved with it toward the back gallery.

"There are no ants in it," said Henry, whose preference always was to turn these dumb protests of his mother's into jest.

"I wasn't thinking of ants," said Mrs. White, following him into her own room, where he had gone to "freshen up" a little for supper, "but the little while you are at home with me, Henry, I prefer not being reminded of your degradation."

"I'm sorry you will persist in taking such an uncomfortable view of the situation, mother, but I declare I don't see how I can convert you to my way of thinking."

"It's not what I think of the whole thing that matters," said Mrs. White, entirely effacing herself by an accent, as she turned toward the closet to get out a fresh towel for him, "but it's the excuse it gives these new people for speaking impertinently of you"—she laid the fresh towel close at hand for him. She never neglected the slightest thing that would make Henry comfortable. "Why, really, Henry, they don't seem to think you are a bit better than themselves since you've taken to going off every morning with your tin pail on your arm,

and only this noon, when I told that outrageous Henry Robinson—"

The wash-bowl came down on the marble slab of the wash-stand with a crash. Henry had lifted it high in two shaking hands and dropped it. It lay in many pieces on the stand and on the floor. Mrs. White looked from her son to the broken bits of china. His face wore a dark flush, and before he buried his wet head in the towel she caught a gleam in his eyes which she had never before seen there. Some of his comrades on the battle-field had.

"Really, Henry, if I didn't know better I would say you did that on purpose," she said, lifting her skirts high and stepping carefully over the wet place on the carpet to pick up the fragments of china.

"I will do that, mother, if you will wait a second," he said, emerging from the towel with humble apology in his looks, but with no attempt at an explanation.

"It doesn't in the least matter," said Mrs. White, in an injured voice. "So long as you've come down to eating your dinner out of a tin pail, I might as well come down to washing my face in a tin basin. That bowl" (with plaintive emphasis on the pronoun) "was of real china, and almost as old as you are. There he is

again!" Mrs. White's tone and expression changed suddenly from injured acceptance of the inevitable to active animosity. From her position at the wash-stand she could see the kitchen door. Into its dark recess a tall form had that moment been engulfed, but not so quickly that she had not identified it.

"There who is again?" Henry asked, rising from the floor with his hands full of broken china.

"That Henry Robinson. He comes to the kitchen as regularly as—Where are you going, Henry? My son, come back. Don't you know you must use a little policy with these creatures?"

But he was gone, and, as she stood there trembling, the sound of angry words and high-pitched voices came up to her from the yard. She could hear Henry's voice raised in command. She could hear a sullen retort. Then a sound of scuffling feet and a gurgle of resistance, as of some one denied the free use of his tongue, and a little later on the slamming of the gate. Henry came back to her presently, looking white and exhausted.

"What have you done?" his mother asked in a frightened whisper.

"Put him out the gate for to-night," said Henry, readjusting his cravat before the glass

with trembling hand. "To-morrow I'll get out a writ of ejectment for him."

"Pray don't be rash, Henry," Mrs. White said, anxiously. "You know there's no end to the mischief these creatures can do."

"Yes, I know it; I've just been reminded of it. But it won't do to let them think you're afraid of them. I'll go in the first thing to-morrow and see Miss Ray's friend."

Mrs. White repeated the closing words of his sentence like a mystified echo—"Miss Ray's friend!"

"Yes, the Provost Marshal," said Henry, now gotten to the end of his immense stock of patience. He had found life a very bitter thing all this day. Fate had been pricking him with her sharpest thorns, and the result was that his overtaxed nervous system yielded to the strain, and he hurled one embittered reproach at the woman who was such a large integer in his present unhappiness.

The envelope burned in his pocket; he plucked it out and cast it down before his mother.

"Miss Ray's friend," he repeated—"the gentleman who has his heel on the neck of all her old friends, but receives notes from her."

Mrs. White was frightened and stilled. She had never seen Henry quite like this before.

His eyes were positively black from passion. She wished she had never mentioned that affair of Henry Robinson. But how could she tell that Henry had come home ready for an explosion? Dear! how irascible he had become! She was actually getting to be afraid to open her mouth! Life wore a decidedly uncomfortable aspect at Whitefields that night for the mother and son. But there was no self-reproach in Mrs. White's reflections.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. WHITE TURNS DIPLOMAT.

WHEN Henry, the next morning at the breakfast-table, proposed to his mother that she should ride in with him to Baldy's Point, she put the coffee-pot down with a hasty thump and looked across at him in undisguised surprise. It was so very unexpected, you see. Since he had become "a day laborer" (Mrs. White frequently scourged herself with those words as she would with a knout), whenever actual necessity compelled him to go to town to see about a supply of meal or pork, or something of that sort for the plantation, he had generally saddled his horse before breakfast, and, gulping that meal, had dashed in and back again quite as if he were under a severe wage-master who was likely to dock him for loss of time. But here he was actually proposing to take her with him in the buggy. Her buggy was one of Henry's improvements. He had tinkered at the old one and painted it and furbished it, "for all the world," she said in mournful notes of enforced

admiration, "as if he'd been born in a carriage-maker's shop."

"It's that matter of the china bowl," she said to herself, once more taking up the coffee-pot after she had given him an eager assent. "No doubt he feels badly enough about it, and wants me to look for its match." While he, to whom the bowl was already an effaced accident, was wishing it was not necessary to so encumber himself on his errand to the Provost Marshal.

But the man with whom he had come in contact the night before was little better than a vicious brute when thoroughly aroused, and might put some of his many threats against himself into execution during his absence. He would feel safer to take his mother along.

The ride to Baldy's Point was accomplished in almost unbroken silence. Mrs. White was inclined to look upon it as an intervention of Providence in her behalf. Ever since Henry had thrown that crumpled, empty envelope down before her in such a blaze of passion, she had been longing for an opportunity to interview Fanny Ray. She took quite a hopeful view of that fierce outburst of wrath on Henry's part. It must have had its rise in jealousy, and, if jealousy were still possible, then love was by no manner of means extinct. A load

was lifted from her heart. Never for a moment had she lost sight of her darling scheme to bring these two together, but Henry's awful and stubborn silence on the subject had baffled her up to this moment.

She felt frequently in the little satchel she carried in her hand to make sure that the tell-tale envelope had not taken fresh wings to itself and flown out of her reach. She meant to lay it down before Fanny Ray, with dramatic suddenness, and ask her to explain it. She was not quite sure yet how this was to eventuate in a reconciliation, but once let these two foolish young people understand that memory occasionally busied herself about their affairs, and things would work around all right.

Mrs. White had boundless theoretical confidence in the ability of Providence to adjust matters here below, but she was never averse to lending Providence a helping hand; so, while she leaned placidly back against the freshly upholstered cushions of the renovated buggy, she was arranging every detail of the coming interview with Fanny. While he, leaning slightly forward as he drove as rapidly as his horse could be induced to get over the heavy swamp roads, was thinking of nothing on earth but the bitter necessity of going to this Provost Marshal with his complaint and demanding the

removal of his obnoxious tenant. The chief bitterness of it lay in the fact that only yesterday he had informed this intermeddler that he was quite able to attend to his own affairs, but he had, since making that bold assertion, been openly defied by the negro, who had said, insolently, that there was "but one white man in the country who could make him budge, and that man wasn't named White."

"Of course he meant Wesley Ford," said Henry to himself, giving the unoffending animal between the new shafts of the old buggy several entirely uncalled-for reminders that he held the whip-hand of him at least.

"Where shall I put you down, mother?" he asked, as they finally trotted into Baldy's Point in fine style.

"At Sellers's," Mrs. White answered, briskly. "I've got to look for some lima beans and okra seed, and I want to see if he's ordered that churn from New Orleans I wrote in about; and I've got a few new potatoes for Mrs. Sellers under the seat here. And you can take me up here too, son," she added, clambering stiffly down from the tall buggy on to Sellers's gallery, assisted by Henry and Sellers and the clerk. "I'm not in visiting rig to-day. Give Mr. Sellers the potatoes from under the seat, Henry."

She was gone; had disappeared within the store. She did not tell him that she knew of a straight and narrow path that led directly from Mr. Sellers's cow-lot into Judge Ray's back garden. There was always a picket off somewhere in the fence that divided the Sellers property from the Rays'. Neither Mrs. Ray nor Mrs. Sellers would have entertained the idea of a perfect fence for one instant. It was the greatest convenience in the world, that hole in the fence, when Mrs. Ray wanted to send over to Mrs. Sellers for a cup of yeast to start her own with, or Mrs. Sellers wanted to slip through to hunt the nest of that perverse turkey-hen that showed such an incurable preference for the Rays' orchard over its legitimate and carefully prepared nest in the cavernous depths of a recumbent sugar hogs-head.

Until this unhappy estrangement between Fanny and Henry, Mrs. White had been in the habit of driving boldly up to the Judge's front door and calmly announcing her intention of spending the day, sure always of a turbulent welcome from the Judge down to "Major," Fanny's big black Newfoundland dog, who knew her quite well; but the front door of the Ray house faced immediately on the Court-house square, where Henry had gone to inter-

view that terrible Provost Marshal, so she must approach Fanny surreptitiously.

She was compelled to take Mrs. Sellers partially into her confidence, for what excuse could she offer for plunging straight through her premises via the cow-lot? Mrs. Sellers was the most tractable of mortals, and when she gathered that Mrs. White wanted to see Fanny in "hopes of adjusting that unhappy affair," she herself piloted her visitor through the back premises down through the cow-lot, and gave her a cordial *l'envoi* in shape of a vigorous squeeze through the aperture. Mrs. White was a taller and a larger woman than either Mrs. Ray or Mrs. Sellers, and when her chin and her knees were brought into violent and sudden juxtaposition by the exigencies of space, and it was found necessary for Mrs. Sellers to eject her forcibly, as it were, into the Ray orchard, she felt very surreptitious indeed.

Miss Ray, curled up in the hammock on her father's back gallery at that moment, was quietly crying to herself. She felt miserably nervous and unstrung. There was that affair of the Provost Marshal. She knew it, or she rather, had been discussed in every house at Baldy's Point before this. But that was not what had brought her to the point of tears just then. She had taken that step after advising

calmly and deliberately with her own conscience. That was the only counselor she ever treated with marked consideration. She was quite sure she had done right so far, but there might be consequences. In fact, she had just seen something that made her think there was already a sequel to that visit of the Provost Marshal's to Whitefields, and she felt a sickening sense of responsibility for everything just then. Sitting at the sewing-machine which stood by the front window in her mother's room—for the best light was in that corner—she had seen a familiar object, three familiar objects in fact, advancing up the road that led straight by the Judge's door before cutting across the Court-house square to the county offices. The three familiar objects were the horse that Henry White was driving, the buggy he sat in, and the man himself. She closed her eyes at the first glimpse of them, and felt ashamed of the hot rush of blood that dyed her very neck crimson.

Had some miracle been performed, and was Henry coming to tell her he had forgiven her heartless foolishness and that he loved her yet? And was he coming to take her on one of those long, delicious rides that he and she used to take so often, bowling along the river bank below Baldy's Point, with the green rampart of

the levee studded with wild camomile on the one side of them, and the tender fringe of the button-willow and the elder-bushes on the other? Ah! what sweet visions came from out the past to meet her in that one second of wondering uncertainty! No, he was not coming to her. He had driven past the house without one sidewise glance, had turned his horse's head across the square, and was soon engulfed by the opening and shutting of the big Court-house gate.

It was then that she had stolen away from the sewing-machine with a sudden plea of headache addressed to her mother, who was cutting out something big and white and intricate on the bed, and who had her mouth too full of pins just then to sympathize or to advise. She was half frightened. Suppose this sudden descent upon the Provost meant mischief! How did she know that Henry White might not have come there to give him his opinion about his meddling propensities! And supposing they should both get angry, and from rude words come to something worse—and it was all her fault! Small wonder the tears came hot and fast and readily.

She heard some one come almost stealthily up on the back gallery, but she was too absorbed to open her eyes and see that it was

not Mrs. Sellers. Mrs. White really did advance with unnecessary caution. This whole proceeding was so enveloped in secrecy that, although it was high noon, with a brilliant sun overhead, and the mocking-birds that always rested in the crape-myrtle tree by the Rays' back gallery were singing away in that tireless fashion that belongs to them exclusively, she felt all the sensations of an inexperienced burglar as she placed her foot on the gallery floor and struck a loose plank which gave a most unseemly report of her presence and made her start violently.

"Fanny," she called softly, advancing on the recumbent figure in the hammock. "Fanny, dear!"

Fanny opened her eyes suddenly, and the next moment was sobbing hysterically in Mrs. White's arms.

"I've only a very few moments, dearie," said the older woman, smoothing the hair softly back from the girl's flushed temples, "but I want to talk to you quite alone. Suppose we run down to the orchard, then I can slip back through the fence and be waiting at the Sellerses for Henry, and nobody'll know. Henry has gone to see the Provost."

"Yes, I know," said Fanny, not waiting to get anything to throw over her head, only too

eager to hear what Henry's mother might have to say. Perhaps it was a message!

Mrs. White's prepared programme had slipped her memory entirely. She was flurried and hurried. Suppose Henry should come back to the store in a great haste to start home, and no one be able to tell him what had become of her, and she be finally compelled to substitute a full-blown falsehood for the nebulous prevarications which good women sometimes convince themselves are necessary and blameless!

It was past the time of orchard bloom, and the sparse showing of apple and peach and apricot trees which the Judge nursed with such assiduity were bending beneath an unusual promise of fruit. She stopped under the shade of a peach-tree, and, hastily rummaging in her hand-satchel, brought out the condemnatory envelope.

"Fanny, darling," she said, in a voice that trembled somewhat from the excitement of the occasion, "I don't in the least know how this fell into Henry's hands, and I'm quite sure you'd never do anything that a young girl could not do with perfect propriety, but, my poor boy, oh, Fanny! he's been in such a way!"

Fanny took the envelope wonderingly. Then a radiant gleam came into her eyes.

This is for your comfort, not for his. Swear to me you'll not breathe one word of this to him."

"I can't," said Mrs. White, looking anxiously upward to see if the sun had altered its position materially since she had come into the orchard.

"Can't what? Can't swear?"

"Can't tell Henry. Oh, Fanny! he's grown so stern and exacting of late! Why, I hardly know my own child. I'd never dare to own that I'd been near you."

"No!"

Miss Ray did not seem to be very much discomposed by this information. She could cope with anything in her old lover but frozen indifference. Once the idea gained ground in her mind that she still had possession of his heart, let her tenure be ever so slight, she composedly assured herself that she could enlarge that tenure at will. How much brighter the world had grown of a sudden!

"I must be going now," Mrs. White said, twining her arms around Fanny's slim waist. "Henry will never spend one unnecessary moment away from his work. He came in to see that Mr. Ford about that Henry Robinson."

Fanny breathed freely. Then it was not a personal encounter over there, such as she had nervously pictured to herself! Then they

kissed each other fervently, these two woman who had one common love between them, and Mrs. White walked away rapidly toward the opening in the fence, but Fanny stood quite still under the peach-tree tearing the envelope into small bits.

“Henry White jealous! Delicious!”

She said it aloud, then laughed for very gladness at the thought, and turning slowly back toward the hammock, she flung herself into its meshes and dreamed the whole bright morning away in sweet imaginings of what might yet be.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROVOST'S MAIL.

THE mail that the Provost Marshal helped himself to out of the pigeon-hole in the box on Sellers's counter the next morning contained a letter which set him to pondering deeply. It also opened up some very bright possibilities, which he was almost afraid to welcome too eagerly, for fear of their turning into disappointing impossibilities. He had grown a trifle morbid since his separation from Ann, and had formed a habit of accusing Fate of malice prepense where he was concerned.

The letter in question was from his wife, and one paragraph in it surprised him immensely, and set him to maneuvering energetically

"Among the names you mention as those of the principal people in your neighborhood," Ann wrote, "I see those of Major Wilson and his daughter Amy. Can it be my very own cousin, Amy Wilson? But they lived in New Orleans. Mamma's only sister married a Mr. Wilson (he might have gotten to be a major, you know, during the war), and her name was

Amy. I've seen my Aunt Amy. Mamma and I visited her once in New Orleans, and I used to be perfectly happy at her house, though a little bit afraid of her husband, Mr. Wilson. Amy—my cousin Amy, I mean—used to come on here from Troy, where she was at school, to spend her holidays with us. She was an angel. Do find out immediately if these Wilsons are the same people, for if they are I will not consent to remain away from you another month. You tell me you 'could not subject me to the coldness and dislike that are your daily portion'; but I do not believe even this terrible war could have altered my darling Amy so that she would not make me welcome. I am going to write to her myself by this same mail. If there's a mistake, and the Wilsons you speak of are not my Wilsons, I'm sure they can't execute us for the mistake. I'm going to board with them."

As the Provost folded up this surprising document, he said to himself that "perhaps Ann had been a little hasty." He was as morally sure as a man could be of an unseen thing that the same mail which brought his letter from Ann had brought one to this Miss Wilson, whom he had never seen, but of whom he had heard such remarkable things. Should she really prove to be Ann's cousin, how much

pleasanter things might be made for that dear little patient woman waiting up there in Vermont for him to say "Come." When it had seemed utterly impossible to have her with him he had cultivated the stoical element in himself; but now that Fate seemed smoothing the way for him so unexpectedly he yielded to the impetuous element in him. The impetuous element in him carried him to Judge Ray's door, where he asked boldly "to see the family."

Mrs. Ray came in, but reported the Judge as being too busy to be disturbed. "Would Mr. Ford state his business through Mrs. Ray?"

Mr. Ford flushed to the temples. Mrs. Ray had three anxious little puckers on her forehead which always deepened into furrows in moments of perplexity. "It might really be dangerous," she said to herself, "to slight this young man." The Provost felt in his pocket for Ann's letter. He wished he had dared to ask for Miss Ray alone. She was "broader" than these old folks to whom she belonged.

"I merely called this morning, Mrs. Ray," he began, with an unfortunate stiffening of manner, "to ask a few questions."

Mrs. Ray's anxious puckers deepened perceptibly. She was a timid soul. "At best," she hastily considered, "questions were entang-

ling, and answers compromising." She only saw, in the extremely erect young man before her, a Government official, who might or might not be about to entangle her in some damaging admissions, from which not even the Judge, with all his legal lore and natural acuteness, could exculpate her. And Mrs. Ray could imagine no higher degree of perplexity. Come what might, "that man" should extract nothing but the vaguest generalities from her.

"Do you know the Wilsons who live back here somewhere out on the plank road, Mrs. Ray?" he asked, putting his finger on the name of Wilson in Ann's letter, as he fixed the Judge's wife with a rather unnecessarily intense gaze.

"Which Wilsons? There's no end of Wilsons in this county. There's old John Wilson, the blacksmith, and a lazier mortal never lived—it puzzles me to know how he does keep from starving—and the Wilson girls, whose father was a steamboat captain about twenty years ago—and Lawyer Wilson, but I expect there's more Wilson than lawyer there"—(Mrs. Ray evidently purposed making up in volubility what she might lack in explicitness—but the Provost brought her up with a "round turn," so to speak).

"I mean Major Wilson, who lives on his

plantation back here somewhere in the swamp, with his only child, a Miss Amy Wilson."

Thus forced into a corner, Mrs. Ray said, shortly: "Yes, I know them; what then?"

"Did they ever make their residence in New Orleans?"

Now, Mrs. Ray knew as well as she knew anything in the world that it was only after his wife's death that Major Wilson, turning away in bitterness of spirit from the rush and clamor of city life, had established himself personally on the plantation and turned "Amy out to skirmish for herself," as he had expressed it at the time. But how did she know what this man had gotten hold of against the Major, who may have been whatever you please before the war, but was down now, and she was the last person to give him another blow?

She "supposed Major Wilson might have had business in New Orleans, as every cotton planter had, when they'd had business anywhere. She knew very little of their affairs."

"Could you give me his wife's maiden name, Mrs. Ray?" The Provost asked this, taking out his pencil, which made the Judge's wife feel quite as if she were giving her deposition, and for all she knew she might be helping to take the very roof from over Amy Wilson's head.

She wished from her heart the Judge had come in here, or even Fanny, either one of whom could manage this man better than she. She was sure she was being interviewed for some sinister motive.

"Mrs. Wilson's maiden name?" she repeated, reflectively. "Mrs. Wilson's—maiden—I've such a wretched memory."

Fate favored her at that moment. Fanny had fully intended making her appearance in the parlor before Mr. Ford's departure, but as she did not intend he should presume too far on yesterday's accommodation, she timed her arrival to suit herself, and when she did come in she was habited and hatted for her usual morning's gallop on horseback. The day must be very bleak to induce her to forego this pleasure. She meant he should see her preoccupation.

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," the said, standing before the Provost with her long skirt gathered up in one little gauntleted hand, "for what you did yesterday. You told me then you would let me know later on what price you put on your services. It was very good of you."

Wesley Ford withdrew the hand which he had involuntarily extended, and looked down on her silently. "So slight and tender looking,

and yet so coolly insulting," was what he was thinking. Then, with the disappointment of it all sweeping away his better judgment, he spoke hot, passionate words that showed these two women the *human* side of this Government tool.

"I came here this morning, Miss Ray, to name my price for services rendered, as you are pleased to put it; but since I've come I'm quite convinced it would be entirely too high, in your estimation, so I prefer naming none—"

"It's for me to judge of my own ability to pay," she said coldly, raising her head slightly, and looking at him calmly as he stood flushed and uncomfortable before her.

"You shall judge then, and if I ask too much, you can simply order me from your presence."

"He is going to propose to her, right here and now," Mrs. Ray said to herself, violently perturbed over such unprecedented impudence. "I'm quite sure the Judge will have to come in, after all."

"I came over here this morning," said the Provost desperately, "to ask a few simple questions about some of your neighbors. I've grown used to being misunderstood every time I open my mouth, but suspicion of me doesn't always crop out as plainly as it has here this morning. I wish I could convince you people

that I want to be of service to you if you will let me."

"Did you want to be of service to the Wilsons?" Mrs. Ray asked with a suspicious ring in her voice.

"No. My inquiries concerning the Wilsons were altogether selfish. I wanted to find out if Miss Amy Wilson is or is not a cousin of my wife's."

"Your wife's!"

Quite as if the possession of a wife was the last thing they would have accused the Provost of.

Why should both women have voiced their surprise simultaneously?

"Yes," he went on hurriedly, thinking more of Ann's wishes just then than of anything else in the world. "She writes me that if this Miss Amy Wilson is her cousin, she feels quite sure she will not be averse to receiving her under her roof, even if she is the wife of a despised and condemned Federal official, and I thought perhaps Miss Ray would be kind enough to discover for me how Miss Wilson felt on the subject. I had even dared to think perhaps you would give me a letter of introduction to the young lady. My wife seems to think she is an angel."

"She is," said Fanny, confidently. Her feel-

ings toward Amy Wilson had undergone a tremendous revulsion since Mrs. White's visit. And now here was the Provost owning up to a wife, and seeming to be really fond of her, too. What a queer turn things had taken!

"I tell you what I will do," she said, nodding her little plumed riding-hat sagaciously, as she smiled pleasantly up into the young man's flushed face. "I had just come in here to tell mamma that I intended riding out to see Amy this morning. You may go with me, and then I know Amy and the Major will receive you kindly. The Major is my most constant adorer."

"Will you do that?" he asked eagerly, but Mrs. Ray looked dissatisfied, and fidgeted openly.

"You don't like it," said the Provost, turning suddenly upon her and driving her to equivocation.

"Fanny is not equal to so long a ride on horseback. She's not as strong as she thinks she is."

"I will bring my village cart if I may?"

Mrs. Ray was silent. On the one hand was the shocking scandal of having Fanny drive through town in a village cart by the side of the Provost Marshal; on the other was the danger of offending this potentate. If the

Judge only wouldn't shift everything on to her shoulders! Fanny was silent, too. If they went on horseback, she had meant to go by a bridle-path through the woods, a short cut to the Wilsons'. If she went in the village cart, they must go by the big road, and, Henry White must exact toll of them. Her evil genius whispered to her that to go in the village cart by way of the plank road would inflame Henry's jealousy to the pitch of expression. "Once bring him to *say something*," was her process of reasoning, and she could speedily adjust matters.

"I will go in the village cart," she said, a trifle nervously, for it certainly was rather a daring thing to do, "and I will change my habit while you are getting it ready."

"Fanny!" This exclamation came from Mrs. Ray as Ford bounded away in boyish eagerness to get the gig.

"You are quite right, mamma; I don't believe I am equal to the ride on horseback, and I had positively made up my mind to see Amy to-day. So don't say a word, please."

Her eyes sparkled; a bright spot of red burned in either cheek. The determination to bring Henry White once more to her feet as a suppliant was intoxicating. She was rapidly

losing sight of every argument against this expedition.

"Then to think, mamma," she said, "how immensely this may benefit the Wilsons. If this man should turn out to be a connection of theirs, of course he will take right hold and help that poor darling Amy, who is wearing herself to a shadow. And how anxious he seems to have his wife with him! I suppose he's human, if he is a Provost."

She rushed off to rid herself of her long habit, and was standing waiting on the steps when Wesley Ford drove up to the front gate in the smart little vehicle which, with its glittering harness and fast trotter, was the envy of all the unmarried youths of Baldy's Point, and an offense to their elders.

They were gone, and it was irrevocable, and Mrs. Ray went back into the house with tears of mortification in her mild eyes and a surging wish in her gentle heart that Judge Ray might be a little more like other men.

As for Fanny!

The sense of adventure and of daring was uppermost for the first half of the drive. She was excited, and laughed and talked with almost hysterical vivacity. This reckless mood was vastly becoming to her physically. Wesley Ford had always thought her rather dull of color-

ing and abnormally quiet. But this merry girl! If she should only "take to him," what good comrades they would be! It was of Ann he was thinking, even while lending an attentive ear to the incessant flow of comment and question from Fanny's lips. She talked as if she were afraid to be silent. A tremulous dread of the moment when the gig should come to a standstill, and Henry White demand his toll, seized upon her, and when the tall-posted gate loomed in sight, and she knew that little shanty under the sycamore must be where Henry stayed, the vivacity forsook her. She grew as mute as a frightened bird in view of a coming storm, and the pretty color all forsook her cheeks. As a tall form rose from somewhere behind the sycamore tree and advanced toward the gate, a violent trembling seized upon her and she gave a little audible gasp.

"You are ill; shall I turn back?" asked Wesley Ford, looking at her with concern, as the tremor of her frame conveyed itself to his senses. She looked at him imploringly and framed the words, "No; go on," with her lips, but no sound came from them. It was at this moment, when their eyes were fastened upon each other with an intensity born of the occasion, that Henry White first recognized

the inmates of the buggy. They were quite a little way off yet. He was a prompt tollman, and never delayed a passenger at the gate. He was thankful for the short space that intervened before the moment when Ford halted his horse and felt in his pocket for the toll. Fanny leaned forward breathlessly! If he would only look at her! She could not speak! But if he would only look at her he would see all—he could not help seeing the plea for forgiveness, for it was there in all its fullness in her eyes and in her heart! But he did not look at her. He looked beyond her. There was murder in his heart, but he made the correct change for the Provost Marshal with a steady hand, and stepped backward for them to pass on with outward composure, never once letting his eyes drop from the Provost's face to the white cheeks and quivering lips of the girl by his side.

He stood there until the vehicle had passed entirely out of sight; then a fierce trembling seized upon him, and he shook like a man in an ague. The sun blazed fiercely down upon him as he stood leaning against the gate-post for support, but he did not feel it. The clouds of dust raised by the rapidly rolling wheels of the gig settled about his hat and beard, but he was unconscious of it. This

sound of the horse's feet died away in the far distance, and still he stood there.

"God!" he said, under his breath. "And I'll have it all to go through when they come back! Curse him! Curse her! The wantonness of her cruelty is monstrous! What is she made of?"

He went back to his work; to his shingle-making. He forgot to eat his luncheon out of the tin pail that day. He forgot to open Plutarch, which he always did at his noon resting-time—he forgot that he needed rest. He only saw Fanny Ray sitting there by the side of the Provost Marshal, beautiful, cruel, merciless! It shamed him to realize that he loved her dearly yet.

CHAPTER XIV.

ORDEALS.

YES, he had it all to go through with again. It was nearing the time to close the gate for the day when he saw the swiftly advancing clouds of dust which rolled up so much quicker in the wake of the Provost's fast trotter than for the slower-moving teams of the natives, and braced himself for the ordeal. For it was an ordeal to have to listen again to the noisy clatter made by Ford's iron-shod throughbred upon the planks of the road; to stand again in readiness for the trim trap whose burnished side and bright red wheels flashed with such an insolent show of prosperity in the slanting rays of the sun that was setting behind them; to look once more over and beyond Fanny Ray to receive his toll from Wesley Ford's detested hand; to be conscious of every curve of her form, of the downward sweep of her long lashes, of the firm compression of her lips, even of the rigid clasping of her little gloved hands about a huge bunch of flowers she had brought back with her, and yet give no sign of

how hard hit he was. Yes, it was an ordeal, but he came triumphantly out of it. He stood like a graven image close enough to her to have laid his hand upon her head in bane or in blessing. He even managed to answer some remark of the Provost's about the heat of the day, which had been little better than one long throb of agony to him, with a fair show of outward composure. There was no mute pleading for recognition this time on Fanny's part. She, too, had been bracing herself for this return ordeal all through the morning hours that Wesley Ford and Amy Wilson had consumed establishing kinship and discussing arrangements for Ann's comfort. She was glad their absorption in the novelty of this discovery had left her so completely overlooked; glad that the Major's confinement to his bed with an ague had relieved her of the necessity for chattering in the magpie fashion she always exercised for his benefit. She was being sorely punished for her foolish attempt to stir up the embers of a dead love by applying the live coal of jealousy to it. "Henry White cared no more for her," she told herself in rash bitterness, "than he did for the dead leaves of the forest. He despised her. She despised herself. If she could only stay out there with Amy, and not go back at all! But that would be acknowledgment of

defeat. He would think she was afraid to face him again, and, however true it might be, she was not going to acknowledge it, even tacitly. And the Provost! He, too, might suspect something if she declined to go back just as she had come. There was nothing for it but to play her game of hazard out. If only once he would have looked at me, he could not have helped seeing!" That was all her heart's refrain.

"I thought all of you people in the country here knew each other from the cradle up, just like one big family, you know," said the Provost, moving the silken lash to his smart buggy whip idly along his horse's glossy flanks.

"You—mean—Mr. White—and me?"

They were beyond the gate now, and the Provost wanted to talk. Everything had turned out so very pleasantly about Ann's cousin, Amy Wilson. He was rather inclined to think with his wife that she was an angel, she had said with such sweet readiness that she would talk over with "papa" the matter of taking Ann as boarder, and was quite sure he wouldn't object. He was experiencing a social reaction.

"Yes," he said, "I didn't feel at liberty, you know, to introduce you."

"I did—I do know him—that is—I used to know him. We were good friends once—but I made him very angry—and—and he don't seem to forgive me. It was all my fault—I acted outrageously."

She had not meant to say this much. She had not meant to say anything, poor child! but she was entirely too miserable to weigh her words or her actions judiciously. Wesley Ford's face was full of comprehension and sympathy, so were his next words, which came from him rather bluntly:

"Oh! I see—and—I beg your pardon. I'm afraid the day's been a hard one on you. If I'd known—"

"Don't," said Fanny, with a passionate gesture. "I did it of my own accord, and on purpose."

They rode on in silence for a little while after that outburst of hers. The Provost had pleasant food for reflection, and proceeded to mentally compose a letter to Ann, in which he told her all about her delightful cousin, Miss Wilson. He wished the mails came to and went from Baldy's Point a little more frequently. He would not be able to post his letter for two days to come yet, but he would write it that very night. He had just affixed the "yours adoringly" to the letter when Fanny

leaned forward suddenly with an exclamation of impatience.

"What is it?" he asked, rousing himself to the fact of her presence with apologetic haste.

"I've dropped my shawl. Mamma would insist I should put it on as soon as the sun set. I am sure it was on the seat a moment ago, but I can't find it now."

He laid the reins on her lap and sprang out of the gig. "He's as gentle as a dog," he called back, taking sudden thought of her possible fears. They had left the shanty behind them more than a mile. It was completely hidden from sight already, for the road made a decided turn soon after leaving the gate. The shades of evening fell early in that bit of primeval forest where the mighty oaks and pecans and cottonwoods clasped arms in the upper air and conspired together to shut out the light of day from the road that groveled at their feet. When the rapid clatter of the horse's hoofs was suddenly stilled it grew oppressively quiet, and the sleepy twitter of young birds in a nest close over her head came distinctly to Fanny's ears. She must have dropped the shawl further back than she had at first supposed, for the Provost's form was swallowed up in the short, dark vista of the road behind them with startling suddenness.

If she only hadn't mentioned her loss at all! How very crookedly everything in life was going! The tears came into her eyes. She wiped them away and sighed. The Provost's horse turned his head backward over his massive shoulder to demand an explanation of this uncalled-for stoppage, and echoed her sigh ponderously. The mosquitoes gathered pestilently about his sensitive ears. He stamped impatiently upon the planks under his feet, and sighed again. Fanny spoke soothing words to him, and leaned over the dashboard to give him a reassuring pat on the back. A dog barked in the distance; it made her feel immensely far away from every place and everybody. To her over-excited fancy it seemed hours since Wesley Ford had sprung from the gig to go in search of her shawl. Suppose he should go all the way back to the shanty and—

On the quiet evening air a shot rang out! Clearly, loudly, terribly near; only one. The horse started violently, gave a fierce snort of terror, then stood quivering in the shafts. He stood fire well. He had carried his master all through the war. The girl who had been kneeling to reassure him sprang to her feet with a gasp of horror. She uttered no sound. She only strained her frightened gaze backward to pierce the shadowy gloom of the road she had trav-

eled. There, coming rapidly toward her, not directly, but with swaying, staggering steps of a drunken man, was the Provost Marshal. His face was as white as the little cashmere shawl which he had found and was now holding tightly pressed against his side. She could see its livid pallor with terrible distinctness as he staggered toward her, bareheaded. He tried to smile as he reached her and groped for the sides of the gig with the touch of a blind man, but it was a ghastly failure. "I've been—shot! Can you get—me—home?"

He spent all his strength to say it. She reached out to him her two trembling hands. Supernatural strength was given to her in that moment. How much of it was will-power on his part, how much the power of desperation on hers, she never could tell. He was there, in the bottom of the gig, with his unconscious head pillowed on her feet, and she urging the horse over the road in frenzied leaps before (so it seemed to her) the reverberation of that awful sound had died away in the echoing woods.

He had spoken but once after she had gotten him into the wagon: "It was—an—accident—of course," he gasped, then he had grown still. So still she could not tell whether it was a living man or a corpse she was carrying back to

Baldy's Point with all the frantic speed she could inspire by voice and whip.

Of course it was an accident! Of course it was an accident. She said the words over in gasps. She repeated them again and again. It was all the comfort she could extract out of life. She said them aloud, shrilly, as if she wanted to impress it upon the trees that saw it all, and the cold, unsympathetic stars that came out overhead in the pale evening sky and looked down on her so unpityingly. She felt something warm and moist trickling over her feet. It was the life-blood oozing from Wesley Ford's side. She gave one appalled downward glance at—it—that white, still form there that uttered no moan of pain, no whisper of reproach! The snowy cashmere shawl had turned to a bright crimson shawl. She lashed the horse into quicker bounds. On he dashed, flinging white flecks of foam back against his heaving flanks. She closed her eyes and shuddered. If only those tightly compressed lips turned up toward the silent stars would open and repeat those words once more: "It was an accident—of course." She wanted to hear him say that it was *not* Henry White who had done this dreadful thing. On through the darkening woods, where the close-crowding roadside weeds slapped her on the cheeks

with damp, ghostly fingers; out into the open road that ran along the river front, where it grew lighter and she could see the roofs of the houses in Baldy's Point rising grayly in the near distance; faster and still faster, past the long, whitewashed fence of the last plantation, before you reach the town, where the Cherokee roses flung their white sprays like spirit arms upward and outward over the roadway, into Baldy's Point, where the lights were already glimmering in some of the windows. She drove staring straight before her. She turned aside mechanically for the few teams she encountered. She saw without seeing how their drivers all turned to stare wonderingly after her. She noted, without caring, how the man on Sellers's gallery stood up to look after her as she dashed past them, never once drawing breath consciously until she found herself in front of her father's gate, and saw him and her mother and some other people, she never knew who, hurrying toward her with frightened faces.

Then, relieved of her ghastly responsibility, she flung the reins up wildly and sprang from the vehicle into her mother's arms.

"It was an accident," she cried, with chattering teeth, turning toward the men who were crowding about the gig. "Do you hear me?

An accident! He said so," then oblivion came mercifully to her relief.

Before the forest echoes aroused by that ringing shot had fallen asleep again, a man stepped from behind the shelter of a clump of sassafras bushes and walked rapidly toward the shanty. He looked neither to the right nor to the left. He stopped like a startled animal when he heard the roll of wheels and swift clatter of the horse's feet, and stood listening. It died away in the distance, and he went crashing through the underbrush again with long, swinging steps.

It was the man Henry Robinson, who had passed over the road only that morning driving an ox wagon upon whose creaking body all his worldly possessions were piled high. His wife and children had walked sullenly by his side. He had been ejected, legally and in form, but he recognized no man's right to send him forth into the world to look for another resting-place to start afresh, and he had breathed dire threats of revenge into Henry White's indifferent ears as he passed through the toll-gate that morning.

"I only done w'at I tol' 'm I'd do," he said, swaying his head from side to side like an infuriated wild beast, as he went crashing through the undergrowth. "He would have h'it. I gin

him f'ar warnin', en his own gun sarved me a good turn. But I gin him f'ar warnin'. I tol' 'im I'd do it."

He walked more slowly as he neared the shanty. There was no one there to molest, but a wave of superstitions terror swept over him at the idea of having to place Henry's gun back in the shanty where he had stolen it the night before. There must be nothing found about him that could fasten this night's work on him. He had lain cramped and hidden behind the sassafras bushes since noon waiting for the moment of his revenge; had even fallen into a deep, sluggish slumber that had been broken only at the moment that Wesley Ford had stooped to pick up the shawl from the roadside. He had planned his attack with cool diabolism. When Henry should have locked the gate and started homeward, nothing would be easier than to shoot him in the back, replace the gun in the shanty, and rejoin his family, whom he had left at the next plantation. At the first moment of awakening he experienced a little surprise at seeing his victim so immediately opposite his hiding-place. He leered upon the stooping man vindictively. "Huntin' for yo' gun, is you? Well, den, tek it." And, rising to his knees, he had sent that ringing shot home with fatal aim.

Henry White, sitting on the cypress block that served him for a chair when at work on his shingles, with his head bowed on the rude table before him, heard the shot without moving a muscle. It was the idle pastime of every idler in the country now to shoot in season and out of season at anything or nothing. Every negro carried his gun, and every gun was in active, bootless use.

He found it almost impossible this night to go home and face his mother. She had such a persistent way of trying to ferret out the causes for every shade of pallor in his cheeks, or unusual display of reticence on his part. And to-night of all nights it would be hard to listen, as he surely must, to every particular of Henry Robinson's exodus. To-night of all nights it would be hard to ignore the littleness and the sordidness of this new life of his. He could not go to meet it.

The moon came to the aid of the stars presently, and did her very best to illumine the spot under the sycamore where he sat brooding sullenly. It was a very feeble illumination, however—scarcely more than enough to outline his drooping form to the man who, after softly dropping the gun inside the shanty through the window, stole as noiselessly as a panther around toward the sycamore, meaning

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to take a short cut across the fields back to his family. He could not go by way of the plank road. *It* was lying there, stark and still!

The night winds stirred the branches of the big sycamore with a soft rustle like the sweep of spirits' wings; they parted to let a broad beam of pallid light rest upon the bared head and folded arms of the tired young wrestler with Fate beneath them. The negro stood rooted to the spot. His heavy under-jaw fell like the jaw of a dead man. His huge frame trembled. He staggered backward, voiceless from terror, turned, and, with never a look behind, fled, like one pursued, from the ghost of his victim.

CHAPTER XV.

RUMOR ON WINGS.

GRUESOME whispers were afloat in the air about Baldy's Point. Surely the night winds and the bats and the hideous black-winged, gray-hooded birds of prey that perched upon the tall gate-posts and cast sinister glances from their red-lidded eyes down upon Henry White, as he listlessly turned the key in the padlock and took his heavy way homeward that night, must have conspired together to carry the news of the Provost's mishap into every household. How else, in the absence of telephone or telegraph or any of the modern contrivances for scattering the seeds of weal or woe, could Amy Wilson have gotten hold of it before she slept that night?

It, that gruesome whisper which meant so much more to her than it could possibly mean to anybody else, came to her after it had taken on huge dimensions: "The Provost Marshal had been shot." "He had been shot near the shanty by the toll-gate." "Shot by a ball from a Winchester rifle."

"No one had any provocation to shoot the Provost but—Henry White." "The Provost had driven past the shanty with the gate-keeper's old sweetheart by his side." "Henry White was the would-be assassin." The chain of evidence was absolutely without a missing link. And as each strong, perfect link was forced in upon her consideration with merciless disregard for her quivering nerves, the Major's daughter lifted her heart heavenward in an agony of prayer for mercy.

They had not meant her to hear it at all, those two men who told it in whispers to each other that night in the Major's garden. It came to her as a dramatic finale to a day full of unusual excitement and usual discomfort.

When she had turned indoors that afternoon, after standing on the step of the Provost's village-cart to give Fanny one more kiss and to assure the Provost, for the third time at least, that she would "talk to papa about Cousin Ann just as soon as his fever left him and his poor dear head was clear enough for a business talk," it was with an uncomfortable sense of being terribly behindhand with a lot of work that must be finished before she slept.

The Major's bedroom opened on to the front gallery. She peeped through its bowed shutters to see if the noise of the wheels and voices

had disturbed him. He was still lying with his face turned toward the wall. That last dose of morphia had stood her in good stead. What if he should have wakened while Fanny and the Provost were there, and she have had to explain matters, at the risk of one of his awful outbreaks?

If now he'd only sleep on one little hour longer! She never dared bring her work into his presence. His wrath would have been terrible, too terrible to be evoked carelessly. So to the little gallery room that was the hottest place in summer and the very coldest in winter she confined every detail of the dressmaking business, that was really growing to respectable dimension. Flushed and hurried, she opened its door now.

"You's got back, is you? I'se ben stan'in' yhere nigh on to haf 'n hour to see ef my coat's gittin done. Marfy Ann ax me to tol' you she's spectin' uv hern too t'night. We both 'lows to w'ar em t'marrer. Seems lak w'ite folks is mouty 'liberate these days. En day ain' over p'tickler 'bout der promiss nuther."

"I've been interrupted by company to-day, Cynthy," said Amy, threading a needle hastily, "but I promised you and Martha both that you should have your dresses, and I intend to finish them before I go to bed to-night. Could

you send Launce up for them, say about ten o'clock?"

"I s'pose I could," her dusky patroness said, reflectively. "Launce ain't always to be 'pended on, en you promiss me en Sis' Marfy Ann that dem coats should be finish dis mawnin'. Mawnin' is mawnin', en night is night."

"I didn't know then that papa was going to be sick, nor that company would be here," Amy answered, with patient dignity, not attempting to refute the logic of disappointed vanity. She could not afford to give offense to this customer. She was the leader of fashion at the quarters, and was profitable if not pleasant. She had taken up the brilliant organdy, whose much beflounced draperies were destined to add materially to Sis' Cynthy's rotundity, and was sewing with bent back and intent eyes. She would rather "Sis Cynthy" should go back to the quarters and let her finish her task without supervision.

"You gwine put tapes in the inside fer a tie back."

"Oh, yes!"

"En a tail. I al'ays laks a tail to my coats."

"There's plenty of train."

"You couldn' 'low me to try de bes' on w'ile I'm here, could you now, honey? Yer see, ef

h'it don't fit snug I ain' gwine be satisfy, dat's all 'bout it. En my ole man, he say, ef he's willin' t' pay for havin' my coats made 'cord-in' to style, he wants to see de style, dat's all 'bout it."

"I think you will like it, Aunt Cynthia, but—"

"Don' 'Aunt' me; I ain' none er y' aunt ner yer uncle nuther. I'se jus' Mis' Cynthia Drake, dat's all about it."

Amy succeeded in convincing Mrs. Cynthia Drake that much precious time would be consumed in trying on the basque of the organdy, and she yielded the point, substituting therefor much crude advice concerning its construction.

"Member, now," she said finally, turning back on the threshold to deliver her parting injunction, "me an' Sis' Marfy Ann 'spects to w'ar our new coats t'morrer. A bargain's a bargain. I gwine send dat boy Launce up for em 'twix' nine and ten, 'en ef he don' fotch em bofe back wid 'im—bofe, min' you—well, den you knocks a doller off. Dat's all about it."

"You shall have them, if I bring them up myself," Amy said desperately, trembling with the indignation she dare not give vent to.

There was nothing for it but to endure. With the commission merchants supplying only the bare necessities of plantation life, where was

anything to come from but from her own labor, and what avenue was open to her but just this one, bare and narrow and distasteful as it was?

“What would poor papa do without his papers and his pipes and his little necessary indulgences?” she muttered, wiping away a few tears of wrath that clouded her vision and dropped upon a big pink peony on Sis Cynthy’s organdy overskirt. She always reminded herself of the Major’s forlorn helplessness when outraged pride threatened to get the better of her. But just now there was one strand of a brighter hue running through the dark woof of her days. It was Cousin Ann. Things would work more smoothly if they could take the Provost and his wife to board, and what a personal comforter Cousin Ann would be to her, provided always the years had not marred her nor altered her sweet spirit! She was threading her needle for the third time only since Mrs. Drake had swept majestically out of the gallery room, when a dictatorial thump, thump, thump, brought her to her feet once more with an irrepressible sigh.

It was the Major’s cane that made the three thumps which was the established signal between them. He wanted her. She glanced carefully over her dress to see that no tell-tale

scraps were cleaving to it, and stuck all the pins and needles that garnished her bosom back in the cushion.

"Hanged if I don't believe you spend your life pottering around those rose-bushes, Amy! If we could eat or wear roses I'd see some sense in it."

Thus the Major testily, as Amy presented herself, carelessly stripping the wrinkled under-leaves off a full-blown moss-rose. It was one of her pretty fictions. She was always "just in from the garden," or else had run out to the poultry yard to see the young chickens, or something airy and pleasant and easy.

"You've had such a nice morning!" she said soothingly, putting the moss-rose in a wine-glass and locating it where he could see it without even troubling to turn his head.

"Oh! I have, have I? Yes, I quite enjoy being drugged to sleep and laid on the bed like a dead man. The sensation is enjoyable in the extreme. What time of day is it?"

"Nearly supper time; and Aunt Melindy promised to have your chicken soup ready the minute you waked up."

"Blast the chicken soup, and Aunt Melindy too! Do you suppose because I've had a leg shot off I'm going to live on slops all the rest of my life? Tell Melindy to bring me a

broiled chicken and some baked potatoes and hot biscuit and coffee. When you get me down to chicken broth you can take my head for a football!"

Amy went silently out to give this revised order for supper. She knew Melindy would rebel; but there was that jet collar she'd been trying to coax from her so long—that would bring her to terms. She wondered drearily if it would be possible now to finish the two dresses waiting there in the gallery room. Perhaps he would go to sleep again after a good supper.

She gave her order, placated the cook, and returned to the Major's room with no outward sign of the inward turmoil that was making her dubious just then about the desirability of existence at all. Her sweet face wore a pathetically patient look always of late, but to-night it was paler than usual.

"Come here, my daughter."

The old "war-horse," as the people about Baldy's Point called Major Wilson, stretched out a brown, sinewy hand toward her as she re-entered the room. She was not unused to these sudden changes in the domestic barometer.

"I'm a brute, child, ever to say a harsh word in your hearing, my little saint, my lily-pure

Amy; but you don't know what it is, child, to have all the strength and ambition and activity of your best days seething in your heart and brain, and be clogged with a dead body. How much better for you and for me both if that bullet had hit my heart instead of my legs!"

Then she had to turn comforter; had to assure him how desolate life would be to her without him; had to cheer him and scold him and lift him up out of the depths, and give of her vitality to supply all that was lacking to him, and but one Eye saw it all. That eye was not the Major's.

He grew more placid after Melindy had brought his supper in, and Amy had poured out the coffee for him, and mashed his potatoes and seasoned them just to his taste. And by the time he got to his pipe after supper, and Amy brought the backgammon board and played just badly enough to give him every game, he grew absolutely cheerful. He played and smoked himself into a slumberous condition about eight o'clock; and Amy felt really wicked to think she could take satisfaction in such a direction.

He smiled benignantly up into her face as she stooped to give him a good-night kiss, and laid fatherly injunctions on her.

"Now, then, straight to bed, daughter; no star-gazing, no novel-reading."

"No star-gazing, no novel-reading, father; I promise."

At last she was at liberty (?). In and out of the pink peonies, across great green garlands of muslin vines, the needle flew and the scissors snipped. It was hot there in the little gallery room, and the lighted lamp attracted myriad moths and mosquitoes and bugs. The moths fluttered with fatal persistence about the flame of the lamp, until, scorched and shriveled, they ceased to struggle, and lay motionless upon the glass chimney, helping to obscure the light. Great shiny brown bugs came through the window with a buzz, thumping and bumping blindly about the low ceiling and narrow walls until they fell into the great coils of her hair or inside her collar, and made her start with a nervous tremor. Tiny insects, small and gray as the sands of the sea, swarmed in clouds above her bent head and settled in drifts upon the table about the lamp. A bat lost his way, and, fluttering in through the window, circled around and about the lamp that was growing dimmer every second from its incrustation of insects and moths. But her promise was given, and, great as her physical horror of a bat had always been, her moral distaste for a broken promise

was still greater. She unpinning her collar and loosened her heavy hair. It was hot, and she was tired. But she never stopped once until, neatly folded and pinned up in two towels, Mrs. Drake's and "Sis' Marfy Ann's" dresses lay on the bed ready for delivery. The clock struck half-past nine. Launce would be here directly. She must sit up for him. She moved from her place by the work-table, where the moths and the bugs were cremating themselves by thousands, to a rocking-chair close by the window. She leaned her head against the window-sill. How it ached, and how tired she was! The large back yard was enveloped in gloom. The kitchen lay like a block of wood, windowless and doorless, under the starless sky. She heard an owl hoot in the woods that came pretty close up to the yard fence on one side, and another one answered it. A soft splash in the water of the slough down there at the foot of the garden was followed by the trombone of a bullfrog. She wished Launce would come, so that she could lock up the gallery room and go to her own sleeping-room, next to the Major's. She was afraid she would sleep so heavily that she might fail to hear him if he was restless in the night.

She must have been very tired. She sat there with folded hands and head resting on

the window-sill waiting for Launce until— She sat bolt upright. She was in total darkness. The clock was striking eleven. She sprang up and lighted a match. The lamp stood there, an evil-smelling thing, choked to death by the insects. The towels were still on the bed. Launce must have come and found her asleep.

That would never do. Cynthia's wrath was something not to be encountered lightly. She had said she would deliver the dresses herself rather than disappoint her patrons, without meaning in the least so to demean herself. But as things had turned out—well, fortunately Cynthia's cabin was very close at hand. The people up in the quarters never went to bed until long after midnight; she had but to run down through the garden and call for Launce to come to the fence and get the bundles. Rain had begun to fall since she fell asleep. She could hear the soft patter of it on the leaves and grass out there in the invisible yard. She slipped into rubbers and put on her waterproof, more for the protection of Mrs. Drake's and Sis' Marfy Ann's finery than for her own. She gathered the towels under the waterproof and stole from the house as secretly and softly as if she were about to decamp with the pink-peonied organdy and leave Sis' Cynthia in the lurch.

Her rubber slippers on the rain-soaked ground made her progress absolutely noiseless. She knew every path in the garden as well in that pitchy darkness as in the most dazzling sunlight. She would go through the bean arbor—that was the shortest way to Cynthia's cabin. The lima beans grew in thick masses all over the trellis-work of the arbor; the darkness was its densest in there under the dripping vines. She stopped involuntarily; then crouched breathlessly. She heard voices in there under the lima beans. Men's voices! Evidently they were talking on some subject that filled them with suppressed excitement. She sank down on her knees among the wet roots of the beans to listen, with every sense alert. Those were the days when men and women needed to be alert, if never before.

"Yes, sir"—surely that was Launce's voice; doubtless Cynthia had sent him, but he'd never gotten any farther than this. "Shot him! Shot him lak a dog. The Provy, he were riding 'long peaceble-lak wid the Jedge's daughter; you know him—I mean White and her use t' be sweethearts—en, sir, he ups en shoots him in de back wid that 'er new sorter rifle er his'n, en then puts de rifle back in de shanty en walks off home same es he done shoot a wil' hog. But he done wake up de

wrong man dis time. Henry Robinson, him, you know, White put off'n his place, he sent me out here t' tell you he wants you, brer Dan'l, to meet him at de Webb place 'twix' dis en sundown t'-morrer. Henry jes' lef' my cabin 'fo' I start fer de house."

"What he want wid me?" she heard Daniel ask.

"What he want wid you? He want you t' help us settle wid Mr. Henry White. He done lord it long 'nough now, en we gwine mek him onderstan' dis is a free country at las'."

"W'at you gwine do wid him?"

Launce laughed. It was not a mirthful sound. "Come en see. I promise you one thing: he ain' likely t' shoot no mo' Winchester rifles at no mo' Provys arter we get frew wid him."

"Is you be'n to Briarwoods?" she heard Daniel ask, and Launce answered promptly:

"No, we's 'fraid to trus' de news dat fur. We don' wan' Cap Van Dorn to git to nosin' roun'. We gwine mek quick work en shu' work ob dis job, you yhere me, Dan'l."

Amy had heard him, if Daniel had not. She rose slowly to her feet, making no more noise than some timid wild thing rustling the leaves. Cynthia's wrath had sunk into absolute insignificance. What should she do? Who should

she go to? Had Henry White done this base thing? Oh! what a black, black world this was getting to be! Who would show her any light? Who would guide her through this bewildering labyrinth? She never knew how she got back to the house; how she prepared her tired body for rest; how or when she finally flung herself down for a few hours' rest. She was conscious of but one longing, and that resolved itself into one determination. As soon as the first streak of daylight came, she would saddle her horse and gallop over to Cap Van Dorn's. Cap would know what to do.

CHAPTER XVI.

NELLIE MAKES A NEW FRIEND.

WHO can minister to a mind diseased? Who will undertake to trace its workings intelligently, to satisfy its longings, to calm its restlessness, or to limit its desires?

It was with a growing sense of his own inadequacy to such an undertaking that Cap Van Dorn kept his tender watch and ward over poor Nellie Hall. He was quite sure that neither he nor Mammy would knowingly leave undone anything that could make her comfortable or happy, but perhaps they were bungling. How he wished he could take counsel of some sweet, wise woman! Such a woman as Amy Wilson, for instance. Amy, gentle, dignified, serene, always rose before him when he thought of his own need for a counselor. Very often of late, when he came in from the field, Mammy would tell him that "the child had been frettin', and she couldn't pacify her no way." And there was a new look of wistful longing in "the child's" beautiful eyes that quite perplexed him.

"We don't understand her, Mammy," he would say, distressedly; "she's getting beyond us, I'm afraid." And Mammy would assent with a sigh. What else but assent had Mammy ever given to her "w'ite folks"? He began to look forward anxiously to the taking off of this the first crop he had planted since the war. As soon as it was shipped, and he could draw on his commission merchants for a little money, he would take Nellie to an asylum. He wished he could advise with somebody about it. He wanted she should have the very best.

They would indeed have thought Nellie was "getting beyond them" if either of them, he or Mammy, had been on the alert the morning after this talk about her; but Mammy was in the kitchen, at the remote end of the big back yard, and Cap was sound asleep when she came out of the room, walking very rapidly, tying the broad muslin strings of a big garden hat under her chin as she walked. Cap's coat was hanging on the hat-rack in the hall. In the free-and-easy life of the plantation his coat was donned and doffed about as regularly as his hat. Who can tell how she had worked herself up to this pitch of independent action? or why she craved the larger liberty of the fields and woods? She slipped her hand promptly into the right pocket and brought out the key to the gate.

With one furtive glance over her shoulder in the direction of the kitchen, and another toward Cap's closed door, she almost ran down the brick walk, between the rows of Chinese privet, and fitted the key into the lock with fingers trembling from nervous excitement.

"The blackberries are ripe," she said with a little exultant laugh when she found herself outside the tall fence, for what must have seemed, to her disordered fancy, the first time in her life. Only for a moment she stood irresolute, glancing now toward the quarter lot where the blue smoke was curling skyward from few chimneys only, then toward the dense green woodland growth that flanked Briarwood on the south. "The blackberries are ripe," she repeated gleefully, and, leaving the gate yawning wide open behind her, she sped away in that direction like some fleet-footed wild thing returning to its native copse.

The ground was wet from last night's rain, and the dampness soon soaked through the thin soles of her shoes, making her shiver. The heavy, black soil clung to her feet, forcing her to go more slowly and cautiously at each step; but in spite of these minor discomforts, every few moments that little exultant laugh rang out on the quiet morning air as she repeated with childish glee, "The blackberries

are ripe." Looking to the right and to the left of the brambly road for confirmation of this assertion, she passed on out of sight of the house. Her crisp white muslin dress gathered defilement from the dewy bushes and the sodden earth. She looked down on its soiled hem with disgust. Mammy prided herself on keeping "the child" arrayed like the lilies of the field. The briary branches of the blackberry bushes that filled the fence corners clutched at her sleeves with their sharp thorns, and held her garments in a destructive embrace. A frivolous young sapling snatched at the big bow on her straw hat, and essayed to lift it from her head; she only laughed with an exultant sense of freedom, and ran on and on, following no pathway, slipping through openings that scarce a rabbit could have penetrated, shoving the branches recklessly aside with her tender hands, uttering little moans and exclamations when the thorns pierced them, but joyous, free, exultant with it all.

The wild Cherokee roses peeped at her from their brambly fastnesses. She took off her hat, and, swinging it across her arm by the tied strings, she gathered great handfuls of them and crushed them ruthlessly into her hat crown. The sweet-fern trailed its pink blossoms in a tangle of beauty low on the ground; she

plucked them up energetically, and piled them on top of the roses. At every step some bright-eyed wild flower, refreshed by the rain and the dew, lifted its head daintily for her consideration. She greeted them with a shout of welcome like old friends found again, or gazed at them a second in mute absorption as if she were trying to place them somewhere within the scenes of her treacherous memory. Presently her hat was full to overflowing; the green vines trailed over its brim and clung about her arms. Vivid spots of flame-color bloomed in her belt, and at her throat the pale blue fringe flower clustered thickly. No thought of the alarm at the house, no fear at finding herself alone in the dense woods, no consideration of heat or hunger, marred her exquisite enjoyment of this new-found freedom, absolute and untrammèled. She had made a discovery. The world was not a little square plot of grass, bounded on all sides by tall, ugly cypress slabs. It was a boundless world, a world of green trees and blue skies and singing birds and sweet scents, and it was her world, all hers! She had forgotten all about the blackberries, so many sweet scents and sounds lured her on, on—who cared whither? Not she! Now to the east, where she paused, entranced, to listen to the mocking-birds who

were greeting the rising sun with a grand burst of melody; now, to the west, where she stood with folded hands looking with childlike delight at the long, slanting rays of white light that pierced the branches behind her and illumined the path before her; now when she caught the gleam of a spot of brightness that she must add to her hoard; now with a resolute effort pressing through the thick undergrowth, to find herself again in the commonplace, ugly wagon road. Bedraggled, torn, scratched, bare-headed, but with a starry gleam of excitement in her beautiful eyes and a flush on her pale cheeks that made her lovelier than ever, with a light spring she leaped across the narrow ditch that bordered the wagon road, then with a wild scream of terror she clasped her hands and stood as if turned to stone.

Simultaneously with Nellie's leap across the grassy ditch Amy Wilson's horse gave a plunge of terror that almost unseated his rider, and then began a series of curvetings that seriously interfered with his mistress's intentions of getting to Briarwood and back home before breakfast. Even while she leaned forward to soothe him with her hand she was gazing with indignant wonder at the apparition which had caused his terror.

A beautiful young woman, daintily clad, gar-

nished with wild flowers, straying about in the woods close to Briarwood! This, then, was the mystery of Cap Van Dorn's life! A hot blush of shame swept over her pure face. Could she even hold parley with such a man? The two girls stood with gaze transfixed: Amy taking swift feminine note of the soft rounded cheeks, the glowing eyes, and the rich mass of golden hair that helped make that girl standing there, with her arms full of wild flowers, so exquisitely pretty; Nellie mute from the sudden terror of this unexpected encounter, and yet not turning away from this steady gaze with the timid fright strangers always inspired in her. Instead she came a step forward, lifted her hat toward the girl in the saddle, and, with a seraphic smile, said in her soft, plaintive voice:

"You are pretty. I love you. You may have all my flowers. The blackberries are not ripe."

This was the tableau that met Cap Van Dorn's amazed vision as he came crashing through the undergrowth at that moment, and jumped the ditch just where Nellie had jumped it. Mammy had given the alarm, and he had tracked the pretty runaway by the impress of her little soles in the heavy soil.

"Nellie!"

There was reproach and relief and anxiety in that ringing call which came slightly in advance of his broad shoulders, but no shame. Amy's quick ear noted that much with relief.

"And you, Miss Wilson? Why, what a strange rendezvous." He said it with a nervous laugh, simply because he must say something, and all the possibilities of this encounter were crowding thick upon him.

"Who is she? I like her. She is pretty. She may have all my flowers." This from Nellie, but Amy looked down upon them both in simple wonderment.

Then Cap spoke hurriedly, almost roughly:

"Don't be afraid that accident has thrown you into company you would not choose to keep, Miss Wilson. The child who is offering you her flowers and her adulation is one that won't have to change much when she's taken up to heaven. Come, Nellie; you oughtn't to have run away and given poor Mammy such a fright."

But Amy addressed him with sudden imperiousness.

"Help me down, Mr. Van Dorn, and put your—your—"

"Friend," said Cap, with stout defiance.

"Friend," Amy repeated, looking at him with eyes full of candid trust, "in my saddle.

I was going to your house to tell you of something terrible that has happened; but your—she has wet feet and does not look strong. She can ride. You can ride, can you not?"

"Nellie is her name." His voice was infinitely gentle now. It had all come about so suddenly, so strangely. He knew that in the few moments the three had been standing there, this woman, whom he loved so very dearly, had thought the very worst thing possible of him, and had veered instantaneously into a remorseful attitude. "Nellie's sweet face did it," he said to himself; "no one could look in those eyes and believe harm of her."

"You can ride, Nellie, can you not?" Amy was leaning toward her from the saddle, now looking at her with friendly eyes. It was the first woman's voice, except Mammy's, that had addressed words of kindness to her in all the years that had come and gone since her mother's death. It affected the afflicted girl as sweet music might have done. A great tender light came into her eyes, only to be quenched in a mist of tears. Her lips quivered for a second, then they were wreathed in smiles. Such pathetic little smiles—sadder than tears by far.

Cap Van Dorn's voice was husky as he said, looking from the sweet girl-face over the knot

of blue fringe-flowers up to the one in the saddle that was the loveliest on earth to him: "I think the Lord sent you to us this morning, Miss Wilson, and if you'll let me put Nellie up behind you—I'm afraid to trust her on the horse alone—I'll walk alongside and tell you all about her. You needn't be afraid. You know I would not put anything close to you that an angel might not come in contact with safely."

Amy had no answer to make to this. She was spreading the little square shawl that had been about her shoulders on the horse's back for Nellie's comfort. Then Cap lifted the little runaway into position and showed her how to clasp her arms about Amy's slim waist. For one foolish second he envied the child, who clasped her arms about this new friend with a strange readiness for her, who shrank from strangers with such sharp pain. Cap walked alongside, ready to succor Nellie in case of need. "I feel so thankful," he said, as the little cavalcade started forward, "that you've taken some things for granted. You haven't waited for me to convince you that it was all right."

"Her face did that, I think," said Amy, "and I'm afraid we've all been rather unjust to you, Mr. Van Dorn."

A little laugh from Cap made her add, hastily:

"But doubtless it has been your own fault. You have been so defiant."

"I love you. You may have all my flowers, and Queenie too." A soft cheek was laid on Amy's shoulder, and these words almost whispered into her ear.

"Poor little Nellie!" said Cap. "You've quite captured her, or she never would have offered you Queenie. That's her favorite doll."

"Tell me all about her," said Amy, in a low voice; "that is, if you dare with her so close, for I can only ride to the gate. I must be back home for breakfast. I would like to know all you are willing to tell."

In as few words as possible Cap gave Nellie's history. He had often planned to do this very thing, but never in this hurried style. It did not occur to him to think strangely of this sudden appearance of Amy's. She was a great horsewoman, and the two plantations were only a few miles apart. In his wild delight at having her there, close to him, close to poor little Nellie, he had forgotten entirely that she said she had something terrible to tell him. She was there with him. God had sent her direct to him. His horizon seemed expanding, the bright possibilities of his future rapidly

multiplying. She had listened to him very attentively while he had been giving her Nellie's story, and when he saw her press a caressing hand upon the little briar-scratched ones that were clasped with interlocked fingers about her waist, and heard that audible "poor little Nellie" fall so tenderly from her lips, heaven itself seemed opening before him.

They had reached the gate by this time, and Mammy was standing there, stupefied and inert from sheer amazement. With a laugh, Nellie stretched out her arms to her, and Cap, lifting her down gently, turned to offer the same assistance to Amy.

"No," she said, drawing her breath quickly, "I am not going to leave the saddle. Send them in the house, please. Something terrible has happened. Have you heard about Mr. White?"

(Mammy was already half-way up the walk with Nellie, whose wet feet excited her liveliest terror.)

"No."

The shining portals that had seemed to open before Cap Van Dorn's longing eyes but a second before closed with a harsh grating sound. His voice sounded chilled.

"He has shot the Provost Marshal," said

Amy breathlessly, "and to-night the negroes have conspired to be revenged on him—"

"Good God!"

Then she told him how she had heard it, and how it had been kept from his plantation on purpose, for fear he might give his friend warning.

"We must get him out of the county, right off."

"Yes, that is the only way. But you are the only one who can do anything with him."

"What in the—I beg your pardon—how did he manage to get himself into such an infernal mess."

"Jealousy."

"Jealousy?"

"Yes. He, the Provost, was in a buggy with Fanny Ray."

"And Henry White shot him while he was in the buggy with Miss Ray?"

"Yes," said Amy, recklessly giving her only version of the story.

"Then he is a brute, and deserves the worst that could befall him."

"This from you? I thought you were his friend."

Cap ground a circle in the hard-beaten ground under his feet with his heel, in impotent protest. This was hard to stand.

"I'm his friend," he answered sullenly, not looking at her, but at her horse's pointed ears. "Enough of one, at least, to haul him out of this mess if I can. But there's Nellie. I daren't leave her in the house alone at night with things stirred up in this way."

"You can trust her with me, can't you?"

He lifted his eyes to her face and let them rest there. She might be in love with Henry White, but, with all his heart and soul, he, Cap Van Dorn, the despised substitute, must forever adore her. She flushed to her white temples under that burning gaze, and went on hurriedly:

"I think she would be happy with me. I will go home and tell papa all about you and—Nellie—and you can bring her and Mammy over later in the day. Then you will be free. And, Mr. Van Dorn" —leaning down from the saddle, she stretched out her hand impulsively—"please say that you forgive me all the silent injustice I've heaped on your defenseless head."

She had drawn the glove from her hand. It lay there slim and white and pink-tinted in his clasp. Cap bared his head and lifted it reverently to his lips.

"Be a friend to poor little Nellie," he said, "and I will forgive you ten thousand times over."

CHAPTER XVII.

BETSY.

ONE reason why the people in the Whitefields quarters were so rejoiced over the ejection of Henry Robinson and his family was that Betsy, his wife, was well known to be a Voodoo Queen, and they were all afraid of her. In point of fact, it was owing to his wife's mysterious powers of revenge and punishment that he had so long pursued his iniquitous courses with impunity. What satisfaction would there be in "lawing" him about a stolen heifer or a misappropriated shote, or charging him with the theft of their poultry, when his wife was the acknowledged possessor of power to shrivel their flesh, consume their bones with invisible fire, or to hasten the day of decay and corruption for them in any other shape her witch's fancy might give preference to? Hadn't Mandy Wane found a knot of "hoodoo" feathers in her pillow the very week after she told Henry Robinson to his face that he had stolen her red rooster, and had Mandy ever been free of the face-ache since? And

didn't evil-looking bottles, tightly stoppered with corn-cobs (doubtless they were evil-smelling too, only no one would trust themselves close enough for olfactory tests), locate themselves, without visible agency, under the front steps of every cabin where a grudge against the Robinson family had been openly expressed?

Henry himself stood more in awe of his mate than is quite compatible with conjugal felicity, and although himself the beneficiary of her accredited standing with the powers of evil, he was never quite sure when the atmosphere of his own home might become too heavily impregnated with sulphur and brimstone for his own personal comfort. Betsy was a gaunt female, taller than her lord by several inches. Nature and art had combined to give her a sinister exterior that found no correspondence in her simple soul. Her eyes were what are called "wall eyes." So utterly and incurably perverted were they that they naturally suggested the Evil Eye. The loss of one large front tooth completed her facial qualifications for the distinction that had been thrust upon her. Her taste in dress was a complete departure from the love of the barbaric that characterizes her race. Betsy affected black, and with her scant black alpaca clinging closely to her bony anatomy, and a square of the same material bound

about her head, she was certainly an uncanny object to behold. Her reputation as a witch was her stock-in-trade, and not even to the sharer of her life's woe or weal would Betsy ever have acknowledged her own absolute ignorance of all the charms and secrets of the black art, whose supposed possession made her such a power in the land.

It was this ungracious personality that confronted Henry Robinson in the gray of the dawn that same morning. He had been industriously engaged all night, careering from one plantation to another, sowing the wind that was to result in a whirlwind of destruction for Henry White. Perhaps he had not cast a single thought backward at the forlorn cabin on the Webb place where he had unceremoniously dumped Betsy and the children down, before hurrying away to slake his thirst for revenge. He had scarcely expected to find her astir at this very early hour of the morning. All his plans were arranged, and things worked smoothly enough since the swift-flying news of the Provost's injuries had relieved him of his ghost fright.

"Dat was a miss shot," he had said to himself, with a gasp of astonishment at the turn events had taken, then applied himself promptly to telling the story of finding Henry

White's rifle, minus one cartridge, lying in the shanty that night. So far nothing but horrified credulity had been accorded his statement.

He was tired when the dawn came and found him approaching the tumble-down cabin he had taken possession of. All he wanted to do now was to throw himself in the gallery there and sleep away as many of the hours as possible before the night should come again, when he must assume the leadership of the party that was going to "raid" Whitefields.

"What you doin' up dis time uv day?" he asked, gruffly, standing face to face with Betsy, gaunt and solemn, waiting for him there on the gallery.

"I ain' tech a piller t'night, Henry," she said, querulously.

"What fur you don'? Ain' de house good 'nough fer yer?"

"Henry" (she fastened him with her erratic eyes), "thar ain' no jestiss in it. You hear me, dar ain' no jestiss in it."

"Ain' no jestiss in what?"

She stood there with her long, lean arms dropped listlessly before her. Her black-turbaned head was silhouetted against the white-washed wall of the cabin behind her. She let her eyes wander past him as they turned slowly in the direction where Henry White's shanty

lay beyond the trees. There was no grace, but there was a certain moral majesty, in her attitude far beyond the comprehension of the trembling wretch before her.

"Thar ain' no jestiss in it, Henry Robinson, an' evil days 'll come on you ef you don' men' yo' ways. You done it yo' seff, Henry, you knows you done it; an' now you's aggin' de folks on to hu't a w'ite man 'kase he drive you off'n his place. Thar ain' no jestiss in it, Henry Robinson."

Her husband's knees trembled beneath him. He dropped heavily on a rickety bench that stood on the gallery. He would ask her, if he could only swallow that lump in his throat, how she had found out about this thing. But where was the use of questioning a woman who was in league with the devil? Or how could he divine that Betsy, marveling at his sudden departure from the cabin the day before, had followed in his wake to see "what he was up to." She had reached the spot just in time to hear that shot, and to see Henry hurrying toward the shanty with the gun in his hand. She had not prearranged any dramatic representation of her facts. She had simply meant to reason with him, and to tell him she had heard of his plan to "raid" the whites; but, seeing the light of superstitious terror spring into his eyes, she

seized the reins of power with no uncertain hand. Erect, immovable, gaunt, she looked straight before her as she said again:

"Thar ain' no jestiss in it, Henry Robinson. En' I sees the evil days comin' on you ef you don' ondo w'at you's done. I sees de flesh droppin' fum yo' bones en de strength goin' out'n you day by day. I sees de blight settlin' on yo' co'n patch an' de drowf 'sumin' uv yo' subsince. I sees yo' chillun dyin' uv de cholery en de roof over yo' head flamin' up ag'in de midnight sky."

"Shet up, Betsy, fo' Gawd's sake!"

But Betsy would not "shut up," and so he buried his huge head in his trembling hands and tried to exclude the voice of prophecy.

"I sees you gittin' t' be a ol' man widout nuffin but enemies t' hate en 'spise you. I sees de mocksin snakes er crawlin' en squirmen' 'bout yo' cabin flo', wid no Betsy nor no Pete t' skeer em 'way. I sees you—"

An undeniable snore arrested the flow of her eloquence. Betsy was sharing the fate of all domestic prophets; she was without honor. Henry was sound asleep. The prophetess dropped into commonplace soliloquy with ludicrous promptness:

"Clar' fo' goodniss, ef I cyarn skeer him into it, I'll do it my lone seff."

What Betsy meant to do her "lone seff" she did not confide even to the gray, still morning air, but turned sullenly indoors, and, returning with a pillow, she nudged her husband into a state of sufficient activity to induce him to stretch himself at full length upon the bench, where he was soon sleeping heavily.

"Now, stay dar tell I wants you t' wake up," she muttered, looking down upon him for a second as if she wanted to make quite sure, before taking the next step, that his senses were fast locked in slumber.

He was still sleeping when, fully an hour later, Betsy, mounted on a harness-scarred mule, upon whose back she had hastily strapped Henry's own saddle, halted at the back door of the cabin to lay her injunctions on a lot of sleepy-looking children that were crowding about its threshold dumbly wondering what this matutinal display of energy on their mother's part might mean:

"You, Pete, ef yo' daddy wake up fo' I git back, tell'm der warn a dus' uv meal in de house, en I gone wid a peck er sweet taters out to Sellersis to trade fur some. En you, Mandy, you lif' de lid off'n de skillet on de hairth, en you'll fin' some co'n-bread en bacon for you-alls brekfus; en de fus' one I heers on pesterin' dat bowl

of sour milk in de cupboard, w'en I gits back I skin 'im, dat all!"

She was gone; and Pete and Mandy, luxuriating in an unwonted sense of freedom from parental restraint, immediately proceeded to examine into the condition of the forbidden bowl of sour milk.

"Dar ain' no jestiss in it," Betsy said aloud, as her mule shuffled slowly along the sloppy road. "Henry won' never prosper tell he men' he's ways. De Lawd done laid a 'junction on me. I 'bleege t' go."

It was but a short ride out to Baldy's Point from the Webb place. It was still very early morning when she reached Sellers's store. Sellers's new clerk was just taking down the heavy wooden shutters when she passed it. Her trading could wait. She'd get the meal as she came back. All her aim now was to secure a private interview with Miss Fanny Ray.

This was not as easy as she had at first supposed it would be. She presented herself, gaunt and somber, in the door of the Judge's kitchen with such suddenness that Aunt Dinah, who was just lifting a lid off the stove to start the fire, dropped it on the brick floor with a tremendous clatter, and started back in affright. She was morally sure Betsy had come there "to kunger her w'ite folks' vittles."

"Howdy, Dinah?" Betsy said, in tones of affability that were rendered null and void by her sinister glances.

"Howdy, Betsy? How's yo' folks?" Dinah said, with propitiatory politeness. But Betsy had no time to waste in the idle interchange of social amenities.

"I want to see Miss Fanny," she said, almost authoritatively.

"Miss Fanny?" Dinah repeated, with astonishment.

"Yes."

"Well, you cyarn do it. Miss Fanny's been in her bed ever since dey tuk her out'n dat cyart 'bout as dead as tudder one."

"Is de Provy dead?" Betsy asked, anxiously.

"No, bless de Law'. De doctor say he gwine pull frew yit. Dey got de ball out las' night."

"I want t' see Miss Fanny," Betsy repeated, stolidly.

It required more moral courage than Dinah was possessed of to deny a witch any demand, reasonable or unreasonable. She turned toward the house perplexedly. She declined the responsibility of a second refusal.

"Tell her it's Betsy Robinson, en she say she mus' see her," Betsy called after Dinah, emphatically, as she waddled toward the house.

She grew tired of waiting, and quietly fol-

lowed in the wake of her embassadress in time to hear a weak, querulous voice say :

"Tell her I wont see her; I'm sick."

"Yes, you will, missy," Betsy answered for herself, boldly pressing forward until she stood by Dinah's side in the darkened chamber. "En you won think me sassy nuther, we'n I git frew."

"You go, Dinah," she said, in authoritative tones. But Fanny sat up in bed preparing for an angry protest. Betsy looked at her with a distorted glance.

"Don't be afraid of me, sweety; you'll be glad I came fo' I git frew. Only Dinah mus' clar out."

"Go, Dinah," Fanny said, pushing her hair back behind her ears and staring wonderingly at this strange visitor. "I'm not afraid."

"I wouldn't hu't a ha'r uv yo' head, sweety," Betsy said, then stood mute until Dinah's heavy footfall died away in the direction of the kitchen before she began abruptly :

"He was yo' sweetheart, honey, warn' he?"

"Who are you talking about? That poor man in yonder?"

"I mean t'other one, Miss Fanny. I mean de one dat folks say done dis deed."

Fanny's blanched cheeks and lips frightened her; she came nearer and said anxiously, almost imploringly :

"Don't faint, missy. Thar's work fo' you t' do to-day. Please, ma'm, don't faint."

"I'm not going to faint. Go on."

"He didn't do it, missy. De folks all say he done it. He didn', sweety. I was in dem woods. I see Henry White sittin' under the sycamo' tree es white en es still es a ghost, just fo' dat shot was fire'. I hear dat shot—who gwine say who done it? But Henry White never done it, missy. I want de folks to know dat I darsent come out plain, Miss Fanny, but I knowed you wouldn' tell on me, en I wanted you t' know yo' sweetheart didn' have de Provy's blood on his hands. But, missy, de folks think he done it all de same, en dey gwine mek it hot fer him dis ve'y night. Thar ain' no jestiss in it, Miss Fanny, en I wanted to let wi'te folks know. But you won't tell on me?"

"Who are you?" Fanny asked, leaning eagerly forward toward the gaunt black form—this woman who had lifted such a load from her breast.

"I ain' gwine tell you. I don't want you t' know. I wan' you t' write somethin' on a piece uv paper en gin it t' me. I'll tell you what to write. En I'll put it whar it'll do good. You won't tell on me, missy."

"What are you going to do with it, and what must I write?" Mechanically Fanny had risen

and seated herself before her writing-desk. What spell had been laid upon her to make her under such docile obedience to this weird visitor? She had said she knew Henry White had not done this thing, and Fanny was ready to fall down and worship her for the boon of these words.

"What must I write?" she repeated, looking at Betsy eagerly.

"Put it in yo' own words, but tell him he mus'n' stay at home t'-night. De folks is gwin t' pester him. Dey means harm. Put it in w'ite folks' words, honey: if it sounds lak nigger nonsense, it won' do no good. He'll think somebody want to skeer him, en he's a mouty obstinit man, he is dat."

"What are you going to do with it?" Fanny's cheeks were aflame. A feverish light was burning in her eyes. She dipped the pen into the ink, and drew a sheet of paper toward her with a trembling hand.

"I gwine see dat he gits it," said Betsy, with emphasis, "en I gwine see nobody don' know dat he gits it but me. Mek it strong, missy. He's mouty obstinit. Put it in w'ite folks' words."

"Yes," said Fanny, with a little catch in her breath, "I'll make it strong." Then she bent her head as if she would hide the swift-

rising blushes from this sinister-eyed woman who stood with folded arms looking down upon her.

"You are in great danger. You are wrongfully accused of this thing. If you—love—anybody, leave the neighborhood immediately, and stay until your friends can explain matters. Papa telegraphed for Mr. Ford's wife this morning. I wish I could hear you say, before you do go, that you forgive me all I have made you suffer. Whether you are angry with me yet or not, do not, I implore you, neglect this warning.

"F. R."

It was a reckless thing to do. What would come of it?

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT DID COME OF IT.

THE lights and the shadows that chased each other across his own private and individual horizon that day were things to be remembered for all time by Henry White.

It was in utter unconsciousness that he had become the pivotal point for so much suppressed excitement since he had locked the toll-gate the night before, that he unlocked it the next morning. No rumor, even, of the Provost's mishap had found its way to the quiet home behind the locusts. There was no one to tell him save those who were implicated in keeping it from him. His mother and he had dragged out the evening heavily enough. He was glad he had not found her in one of those loquacious moods. He could have stood almost anything better, that night, than a demand for responsiveness.

As it was, she sat there in subdued nervousness, computing all the possible evil that might follow upon Henry's summary action in the matter of the ejection, while he was trying,

by sheer force of will, to convince himself that life was not the leaden-hued thing it seemed.

What a dreadful procession of to-morrows stretched ahead of him! all to be endured or to be met as man meets the shock of battle. If it were not for her, that loving, querulous, unwise mother, in whose sunken white temples the blue vein-tracery was growing more pathetically conspicuous day by day, he would turn his back on it all, and start afresh somewhere, where his past could not hold him in such a death-grip.

That was the thing of all others he most longed to do that night. Perhaps it was because he had deserted her for a few seconds that, when the clock struck nine, and they could decently essay to drop the vail of oblivion on all the worries of the day, he wound his arms about his mother, and kissed her good-night twice affectionately instead of only once in his usual perfunctory manner.

"These are lonely days for you, mother, while I am down at the gate. Can't you think of some one you would like to have stay with you? Some one who would perhaps be glad of the home comfort of Whitefields, poor as it is nowadays?"

She looked at him wistfully, and then made another one of her mistakes.

"Nobody but Fanny, dear. She and I always got on so—"

But there was no one to hear the close of her sentence. With an oath, the only one that had ever escaped his lips in her presence, he turned passionately and left her.

The tears sprang into her eyes. Her lips quivered like a child's.

"What had come over Henry? She was actually getting to be afraid of her own child!"

He begged her pardon the next morning very contritely, when he took his tin dinner-pail from her hand; and she, oblivious of everything but the worn look of his young face and the great black circles that sleeplessness had drawn about his dear eyes, begged his in return, so the reconciliation was complete.

A solemn hush still rested over the little shanty when he came in sight of it. There was not even a bird-note to break it. His long hours of solitude there in the woods were bringing to him what he called primeval instincts. His hearing was growing marvelously acute. His eyes were gradually acquiring the power of discerning objects at a much greater distance than ever before. This particular morning they discerned a small white object lying on the board under the sycamore tree. He quickened his steps perceptibly.

What was it, and how came it there? It seemed to him that he was still at a great distance when this marvel dawned upon him. It was a letter, and he knew from whom. It was Fanny Ray's handwriting. But it was his name, not the Provost's, that was written on the little square envelope which he took up so wonderingly. He remembered, afterward, that he had removed a little piece of brick that had been used for a paper-weight. He sat down on the cypress block by his rude table and held the letter a long time unopened. Why should he be in haste to open it? Doubtless it would but reveal another phase of heartlessness in the woman who wrote it. He must make himself understand that he had fully fathomed Fanny Ray's shallow soul. He wondered why the letter was not damp with the dews of night. He wondered how it had gotten there. No one from Baldy's Point could possibly have come out so early. He wondered why it was there at all; and then, as deliberately as if he were holding an account of sales in his hand, he took his knife from his pocket, opened the small blade and slipped it under the flaps of the envelope almost reluctantly. This was his way of holding himself well in hand. It was a species of self-discipline.

"At las'!"

His woodcraft did not bring that whispered exclamation of relief to his ears, nor did he hear the scurrying of Betsy's feet as she stole swiftly away from the spot where she had been keeping watch and ward over the letter. He was oblivious to everything but the few words that lay revealed before him.

Words of warning, words of penitence, words of kindness from Fanny Ray to him! O miracle of sweetness and light! He took in confusedly the words of warning. Doubtless she had heard the stupid threats of that desperado, Robinson, and, woman-like, thought they meant something. But that she should care to warn him! That she should embody a plea for pardon in that hasty note! That she should care whether harm came to him or not!

A sun-burst of light came down through the branches of the sycamore tree and fell on the note in his hand. The words danced before his dazzled eyes. The birds shook the spell of night from their fluttering wings, and came hopping about him for their daily alms. He flung it to them with a lavish hand. Life was not leaden-hued; it was bright, it was dazzling, it was sweet, and all the sweeter because the Provost had a wife.

He fell to work on his shingle-making after awhile with fierce energy. He must work some

of this excitement off at his finger-tips, or the "first fool that came along would read it or mis-read it." He marveled, as the sun mounted higher and he worked on undisturbed, at the strange absence of travel along the road that morning. It must have been well on toward ten o'clock before he heard a sound other than the soft splitting away of the cypress block under his sharp draw-knife. It was a horseman clattering along the plank road, and from the gait he was coming he would not relish detention. He was at the gate holding it wide open by the time Cap Van Dorn stopped his horse so suddenly on the other side of it as almost to precipitate himself over its head. The gate keeper looked up at him smilingly:

"Hillo! you ride as if Old Nick himself was at your heels."

"Upon my word!" said Cap, looking down upon him with a mystified glance before he sprang from the saddle, and, with the bridle thrown over his arm, led the way back to the shanty. He was mystified by the brightness in Henry's face.

"You haven't been at work?" he asked, kicking the new-made shingles impatiently out of his way.

"Of course I have. Why not?"

"You're looking more cheerful than I've seen

you since you got back," Cap said, taking keen note of the new light that had come into Henry's eyes, and a certain elate erectness.

"I believe I am feeling a little better than usual this morning," said Henry, blushing hotly and feeling nervously in the side-pocket where he had thrust Fanny's note.

Cap lifted his hat to run his fingers perplexedly through his thick hair. Was the man lost to all sense of decency?

"Then you don't care whether the fellow lives or dies, it seems."

"What fellow?" It was Henry's turn now to look mystified.

"The Provost Marshal."

"What ails the Provost Marshal?"

"See here, Henry." Cap had seated himself astride the splintery cypress block, but now he sprang up violently and laid both hands heavily on Henry White's shoulder. "Don't act a part with me. It's not the sort of revenge I'd have expected you to take, but I'm going to stand by you, old fellow, and you've got to get out of this."

"What in creation are you talking about, Van Dorn?" Henry shook him off roughly, and stepped back to look at him angrily. There was no mistaking that look of mystified ignorance.

"Then you didn't shoot the Provost Marshal yesterday after he rode by here with Fanny Ray?"

"What! and you dare come here to ask me such a question to my face?"

Van Dorn quailed before the indignant wrath in his friend's eyes. He ought to have known better. But, then, who in heaven's name had done it? Who else had any motive for doing it? The man was an idol with the freedmen.

"That's what it meant, then," said Henry, absently. A new light had been shed on Fanny's words of warning. Could she have ridden out there herself that morning for his sake?

"That's what what meant?"

But he had no notion of sharing his miracle of sweetness with any one else. He smiled, and, shoving the cypress block nearer to his visitor with one foot, said, briskly: "Come, sit down and tell me all about it. I pledge you my word you've brought me the first hint of this whole matter."

"What!"

"You have indeed."

Cap stared at him in wordless surprise. Of course he believed Henry. But what then did this undercurrent of excitement mean? It

showed in his eyes, his voice, his entire bearing.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said abruptly, "that you don't know Wesley Ford was shot yesterday, just after passing the toll-gate? That he was shot with a Winchester rifle, and that you get the credit for it all?"

"What nonsense you are talking, Cap! Have you been shut up in the woods so long that you are ready to believe every old woman's gossip? I did hear a shot yesterday. It was about sundown. I supposed some darky was duck-hunting. If the Provost got the benefit of it, it must have been an accident. I'm the only man in the county who owns a Winchester rifle, and mine is in the shanty."

"Is it there now?"

"I suppose so. I forget it sometimes when I go up to the house, but I generally find it just where I left it."

He led the way toward the shanty while speaking.

"There!" he said, triumphantly, pointing to his gun in the corner.

Cap seized it and raised the hammer. An empty cartridge fell to the floor. Both men turned ghastly pale.

"What does it mean, Hank?" Van Dorn

looked at his friend pleadingly. Surely "Hank" wouldn't lie to him.

"So help me God, Van Dorn, I don't know."

Then Cap held out his hand, and Henry clasped it. They knew that whatever else might have happened, they still believed in each other.

The sun was an hour higher when Cap rose to leave. It had been hard to convince Henry that it was necessary for him to do anything but stand his ground. He, Van Dorn, was bent upon carrying out the programme mapped out by himself after he had left Nellie and Mammy at the Wilsons'.

There was no knowing what the plans of the Provost's dark champions were, but he and Amy had prepared for them as far as possible.

"I've a note here for Mrs. White from Miss Wilson," he said, producing it. "We thought if she was made to believe that she could be useful there to-day, seeing the Major's sick, we would have no difficulty in getting her out of the way."

"That was thoughtful of you both. 'You'll drive mother over for me?'" said Henry calmly.

"No, sir; you'll drive her over yourself. Can't you see what a pucker she'd be in if I, the man she despises above everything, should

incontinently drive off with her and leave you behind?"

"That's true," said Henry anxiously; "but, then, on the other hand, if I drive off with her, these black fiends will say I'm running away from them, and I'll die before I give them a chance to do that."

"Would there be any special display of bravery in not running away? You are one against several hundred. By to-morrow night they may have come to their senses or cooled down a little. At present they're simply so many ravening wolves."

"I'll drive mother over there and leave her," said Henry finally, gritting his teeth with impotent rage, "and then I'll come back as fast as horse-power can bring me. I'll be hanged if I run from a parcel of niggers!"

"The quicker you're off the better," said Cap curtly; "there's nothing more I can do for you at present. You promise to start for the Wilsons' immediately?"

"As soon as I can hitch the buggy up," said Henry, gathering his scattered belongings together while speaking. The sooner he got his mother out to the Wilsons' the sooner he would get back.

Cap drove the sharp rowels of his spurs into his horse's flanks in needless cruelty as he

turned his head toward Baldy's Point. "There was no danger of Henry's coming back to Whitefields that evening," he said to himself, bitterly; "Amy Wilson would see to it that he did not." And then, as if taking blame to himself for even so fleeting a reflection upon her, he lifted his hat reverently from his head, and said aloud:

"God forever bless her. She's one of His own."

His immediate errand out to Baldy's Point was to learn the extent of the Provost's injuries, and to discover, cautiously, how many people knew of this plot against Henry White. Those were times when it was well if a man could prevent his left hand from finding out what his right hand was doing. The slightest indiscretion at this juncture might precipitate the entire locality into a state of fermentation. Whatever his business, it kept him all day out at Baldy's Point. The sun was sinking when he mounted his horse and rode rapidly out of the little town where the one topic of conversation was the shooting of Wesley Ford. It had sunken entirely, and the shades of night were falling fast, when he quietly opened the yard gate at Whitefields, and passed through it on foot. The house was dark, the yard was tenantless; a silence as of

death brooded over the premises. Cap made the circuit of the house and the kitchen to make sure of his solitary possession. Then, mounting to the back steps, he swung himself lightly from its banisters into the branches of a paper-mulberry tree whose higher limbs spread themselves over the gallery roof. With the agility of a monkey, he swung from limb to limb until the roof was reached, ran along it until he came to the dormer, whose closed shutters he raised from their hinges by a violent exercise of strength.

"Slightly burglarious," he said, as he leaped down into the dark hall and paused to pull his vest and trousers into normal connection with each other.

He had provided himself with matches. It took him only a few moments to light lamps in different parts of the house, and to open the doors and windows with a careful regard to the usual routine of the household as well as he could recall it.

Henry's short seersucker coat, which was reserved for house wear, hung on the hat-rack in the hall. So did his low straw hat, with its broad black ribbon band. Cap invested himself in both, then held a lamp in front of the parlor mirror to scan himself.

"Not a bad imitation. If they think he's at

home they won't look for him anywhere else. Perhaps it's all words, but I'll be ready for them. It won't do for them to think the white men are growing timid. Come what may, poor little Nellie will have a friend."

He moved about the house with conspicuous activity for a few moments, then, walking out on the front gallery, he seated himself, lighted a cigar, and, tilting his chair back, elevated his feet to the banister rail, in token of absolute indifference to the brooding storm.

He was seen of more than one dark form as it slunk cautiously by the fence on its way to the rendezvous appointed by Henry Robinson. The night was very dark—so dark that the man on the gallery, whose striped seersucker coat and white straw hat were only dimly discernible by the light of the lamp on the hall table behind him, could see only a foot or two of the broken brick walk that led from the front steps to the front gate, and such shrubs and tree limbs as came within the radius of that dim lamp-light. The mutterings of distant thunder broke the silence occasionally, followed by fitful flashes of lightning that only intensified the succeeding darkness. The pockets of the seersucker coat sagged heavily. There was a loaded pistol in each one.

"If they'll only show themselves," said Cap

to himself, cautiously familiarizing himself with the location of the triggers, "I'll stand some chance."

But nothing showed itself. Under the mantle of the black night the dark forms stole stealthily by the house in ever-increasing numbers. Some of them felt slightly compunctious toward that motionless form on the gallery. But they had yielded up all volition to the man who had bidden them meet him at the Whitefields gin that night. They had conned their lesson like faithful parrots. "Their rights had been trampled on. Their champion had been murderously assaulted, and if they did not revenge him they would be left to look out for themselves in all future emergencies." Appalling contingency! They were going to secure themselves against it.

CHAPTER XIX.

SPECTER WINGS.

AS a usual thing, the amenities of domestic life were none too closely observed in the cabin on the Webb place which Betsy called home. She was not an exacting spouse. She never called her husband to account for unexplained absences, but, with a stolid composure that might easily have reached the exaltation of dignity in a higher social grade, she would conscientiously set aside a large proportion of the family rations for his benefit; which done, she washed her hands and her conscience of all concern in his affairs. Wifely solicitude could go no further with her. But on the morning of that early visit of hers to Baldy's Point, she showed an unusual spirit of conciliation.

She found him sitting in sulky abstraction on the front steps when she rode up with the cornmeal she had traded for at Sellers's tied up in a pillow-slip that was resting on the pommel of her saddle. He raised his blood-shotten eyes as she stopped in front of him, but volunteered no assistance.

"Holp me down wid de meal, ol' man, en on-tie de piller slip. I fetch you a pint^u uv whisky. I ain' gwine pester you no mo' t' day."

"To-day," she repeated to herself, with emphasis, swinging the sack of meal into Henry's hands and cantering away to turn the mule loose in the lot.

Henry's sense of the civil was immensely quickened by that mention of the pint of whisky. He sprang to his feet with alacrity to relieve his wife of the heavy sack. Extracting the black flask from its neck, he dumped it unceremoniously inside the house. He was not without a certain amount of conscience, a stunned and deadened thing that was feebly protesting within his hardened breast, and making it somewhat difficult for him to keep his courage up to the sticking-point.

The whisky was just what he needed. His potations were many and deep. The day was a long one to him, but the night came at last. He had spent nearly the whole time of waiting sitting motionless on the front steps, with his blood-shotten eyes dropped upon the ground between his feet, brooding over his fancied wrongs and feeding the flames of hate with fiery draughts from the black flask by his side.

He was rather glad, when the time came to

start for the Whitefields gin, that Betsy was nowhere visible. She had promised not to "pester" him any more that day, but he didn't care to risk a renewal of her prophecies of woe when he started on his evil errand. There was a long stretch of darksome woodland that he must traverse before reaching the main road, and he'd much rather hear the hooting of the screech-owls in its fastnesses than one of Betsy's lectures. Not that she lectured habitually, but in this matter of Henry White she showed a disposition to be ugly with him.

His cabin was on the outskirts of the woods. It had been originally built for a stock-minder's convenience. Almost immediately after crossing a rickety stile which did duty for a gate he was surrounded by a dense forest growth. He was not timid. He had followed the cattle trail through the somber aisles in many a nocturnal expedition. But to-night they seemed denser and darker than ever.

He stumbled along the rough path with nervous haste. The roots that veined it seemed to have multiplied miraculously and resolved themselves into so many snares for his hurrying feet. The outstretched arms of a blackthorn caught his ragged straw hat and swung it aloft. He reached up to recover it, clutched recklessly at the thorny branch, and

held by it for support. His knees were swaying treacherously beneath him.

A few feet from the blackthorn a strange apparition had sprung up immediately in the path he must tread. Two large white wings, belonging to nothing, apparently, this side the spirit world were waving slowly and solemnly in the direction he had come. Their spectral tips were pointed accurately toward his cabin—the cabin where he had left Betsy and the children. A pale phosphorescent glow shone steadily about the base of the wings. There was nothing more to the apparition. Whether supported by the powers above or the demons below was more than the frightened wretch could conjecture. The sighing of the wind in the tops of the tall trees was all the sound he heard. It might have been the rustle of those ghostly wings, so sadly it whispered. To and fro, always in the direction of his cabin, they swayed, waving him backward from the scene of his meditated crime.

"It's some wil' critter that I kyarn mek out fur de dark," the cowering culprit moaned, and, grasping his hat, he veered abruptly from the cattle trail and went crashing through the untrodden undergrowth like an ox. He would take a short cut around "the critter," and come back to the path farther down, where the roads

forked. He drew his breath more comfortably when the thick foliage hid from his view those strangely luminous white wings.

This detention would make him late, and "the folks" would think he was not coming at all. He quickened his pace almost to a run, and reached the forks of the road quite spent for breath.

There, swaying to and fro, always pointing their spectral tips toward the path he had trodden, were the wings.

He stood still in palsied terror. The very breath seemed frozen in his lungs. In the death-like stillness that wrapped him about he could hear the weird rustle of those unearthly wings. And as they swayed, the phosphorescent gleam was fanned into a brighter light. He stretched his hands toward it beseechingly.

"Do it mean I mus' go back? Do it mean de Lawd gwine scorch my soul ef I don' leave dat w'ite man 'lone? Say, marse spirit, is dat yo' meanin'?"

The wings were pointed slowly and solemnly in the direction of his cabin. He staggered backward a few steps. There was no mistaking that ghostly command. He would give up his revenge. He turned backward with a groan of anguish. Blackness reigned supreme. He retreated half a dozen steps, and then cast a

frightened look over his shoulder. The wings were nowhere visible.

"I'se a w'ite-livered fool," he said aloud in swift revulsion from fear to wrath; "it war'n nuthin' but a w'ite cow. I done swore t' kill Henry White this night, an' I gwine do it."

Veering again, he plunged forward past the forks of the road. Of course it had been all imagination. There was the wide open space where the three roads met, and where the faint starlight showed him everything in its normal condition. Everything was just as it should be. He was all right at last. There was the big road. In a moment he would be opposite the shanty—the shanty that should never again shelter the toll-gate keeper from the wind and the rain. Revenge was too sweet to be relinquished. But It—They—were there before him. They looked whiter, larger, more mysterious than ever, seen in "the open" where the gleam of light at their base shed its faint luminousness over the lustrous feathers. To and fro, always with their spectral tips turned toward the cabin where Betsy and the children were, they waved their warning to him. "Back, go back!"—that was the mute command.

With a howl of terror he struck abruptly off to the right. The river was not far away. He had heard the folks say spirits never crossed

the water. On and on he raced: now stumbling over some unseen obstruction, only to pick himself up bruised and bleeding; now casting a look over his shoulder, only to see those terrible white wings slowly following, always waving him backward from his deadly purpose; now rushing forward with his head buried in his outstretched palms, willing to grope his way blindly, if only he could shut out the sight of that pursuing presence. He heard the rushing river close at hand at last. What a tumult of sound! It was "on the rise." It was rushing seaward in angry, swollen volume. His skiff was there; he was always on the lookout for flotsam and jetsam. Once let him grasp its strong oars, and he would bid defiance to the avenging spirit that was pursuing him so hotly.

At headlong speed he stumbled down the steep river bank and bounded into his skiff. With shaking hands he unwound the chain that secured it to the stake, and, seizing an oar, he sent it spinning far out into the swift current. An eddy caught it and sent it round with a swirl. He gave a yell of triumph as he saw the white wings there on the bank, powerless to pursue; no longer waving, no longer forcing him backward with their spectral tips; motionless, drooping, vanquished! Then he

awoke to a new peril. He was in the swirl of a fierce eddy. He seized the other oar, and, with all his boatman skill, tried to extricate himself. Around and around, faster and faster, he spun, every circuit bringing him again face to face with those motionless white wings. What a witch's caldron it was! Great black drift-logs, rushing by on the swollen current, were sucked in and joined in a devil's waltz about the little boat. In vain he pulled now on the right oar alone, now on the left, then on both. The doomed skiff only spun the swifter in its dizzy circle about the eddy. The blackened corpses of the dead trees smote it fore and aft, until it shivered throughout its entire length. The sound of the rushing waters filled his ears. Mingled with it was the muttering of the thunder stored away in the piled-up masses of inky clouds that hid the friendly stars from him. A rush of cold water over his feet! A hole had been beaten in the side of the skiff! He flung his oars away. They were useless to him. He stood dumbly up in the boat. There was no help, no light, no hope, anywhere. Overhead swift-scurrying storm clouds; around him, swifter-rushing, pitiless water; landward, those still, white wings. Without a sound, with no word of fear, nor of supplication, nor of remorse, he faced his doom. Raising his arms

over his head, he clasped his hands together and leaped. One chance in a million!

The eddy engulfed him. The cold waters embraced him. The swift-swirling logs lifted him in their arms and bore him seaward in triumph, when chance finally released them from the witch's caldron. And the thing that had been a scheming, passionate, vengeful personality, but a moment before, was tossed upon the shores of eternity like a dead leaf. The white wings drooped, fluttered, fell heavily to the ground. The phosphorescent gleam died out as they fell. Betsy leaned far over the river bank to listen for the sound of oars.

"The waters meks a mighty fuss to-night," she said, fretfully, "but he'll come out all right. Let him row 'bout on de water tell he cool off some. I had t' skeer 'im."

She stooped, and, lifting from the ground two immense white crane's wings, whose only function, hitherto, had been to ornament the ends of her one mantel-piece, she slapped them softly together, and, untying the two small bladders appended to their lower edges, she thriftily extracted the remains of two candles, which she deposited in the bosom of her scant black dress.

"I cou'dn' uv headed him off so easy," she said to herself, "ef it hedn' ben fur de whisky

in his head, but I done swear he shant hu't Henry White, en I kep' my word, dat's all. Thar ain'no jestiss in it. Dat w'ite man done fed me en my chillun many a time w'en we would 'a' starved to def fur all Henry Rob'son done fur us. I had t'skeer him out'n it. 'Dat's all. But he'll turn up all right." She folded the wings, that had done such effective ghostly service, carefully under her black apron and started rapidly homeward. Henry must find her fast asleep when he got back to the cabin.

The excited crowd that had gathered from far and near under the gin shed at Whitefields that night waited in vain for the coming of their leader. Not a tenth of their number knew distinctly why they were there. Still a smaller proportion knew what rôles had been assigned them. No one knew anything clearly but the leading spirit that had convened this gathering. They could do nothing without Henry Robinson. As the night wore on and he did not come, they waxed wroth. He was playing them false! He wanted them to run all the risk while he secured himself. Disaffection seized upon them. In darkness and despondency the dense mass slowly dissolved into so many angry atoms and dispersed. Henry White was saved. The threatened storm had been averted by a woman's wit.

Galloping homeward as swiftly as possible after depositing his mother at the Wilsons', he rode up to his own front in some trepidation. Those lights in the house he had left darkened and locked, what could they mean? He advanced up the brick walk with his hand in his breast-pocket. His ringing footfall brought Cap Van Dorn suddenly to his feet.

"Who goes there?" he demanded, peering out into the dark yard.

"Cap!"

Henry bounded up the steps with that astonished exclamation. It all flashed upon him! He drew his friend into the lighted hall, surveyed him from head to foot through a sudden mist that came into his eyes.

"And you were willing to risk all that for me, old fellow?"

"I don't see that I've risked anything worse than a infernal cold," said Cap, laughing lightly. "These rogues are deliberate, to say the least of it. I've about smoked up all your cigars."

But Henry, laying his hand on the sleeve of the seersucker coat, said softly:

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend."

Together they kept their watch through the undisturbed hours of the night. They talked of Nellie, they talked of Amy, they talked of

the past, the present, and the future, and, in that close communion of hearts, the miracle of Fanny's repentance slipped from Henry's keeping and was tenderly scanned, Cap silently wondering if that would make any difference with Amy. And Henry waxed a little triumphant as the quiet hours of the night wore away, for they wotted nothing of the pulseless form that was rushing seaward in the close embrace of the black drift-logs. Nor of the vengeance that the Lord had taken into his own hands.

CHAPTER XX.

NELLIE FINDS AN ASYLUM.

BALDY'S POINT was pining for a sensation. It had had enough in the course of a very few weeks to satisfy any normal cravings, but its cravings had ceased to be normal, and to ask it to rest content now with the hueless happenings of everyday village life was to ask it to forego all its newly acquired taste for the dramatic.

Its prime sensation, the one from which it had extracted the most decided thrills, had been that shooting of the Provost Marshal and Fanny Ray's strange drive through the woods with him bleeding at her feet.

The people of Baldy's Point felt rebuked when they recalled the ready credence they had given to the Henry White theory of the assault. Circumstantial evidence had been very strong against him; but of course Henry Robinson's flight from the country had fastened the guilt upon the right man. Some of them claimed to have been quite satisfied on that point even before Wesley Ford utilized his first

conscious breath to affirm that his assailant was not a white man.

And then the Provost's wife had come—the Ann whose name was never off his delirious lips. And Ann had quite taken the town by storm with her strong, sweet face and her brisk curiosity, and her wide-awake interest in the sleepy old town. So unconditionally, indeed, had Baldy's Point surrendered to the Provost's wife that when Amy Wilson proudly appropriated her on the score of cousinship, and the Fords moved out to the Wilson place as soon as he was able to be moved at all, the town felt as if it had sustained a loss, and so expressed itself.

And then there was that sudden and mysterious "making up" of Henry White's and Fanny Ray's, which had resulted in such an absurdly prompt marriage ceremony.

"Scarcely a wedding at all, "the Judge's wife had said, plaintively distributing the cake and wine at the informal reception held on the return of the bridal party from the church. She had always looked forward to doing such splendid things whenever Fanny should have made up her mind to matrimony, that she really felt humiliated by the suddenness and the meagerness of the whole thing. But there was large compensation to be drawn from the sparkle

that had come back to Fanny's eyes and the lightness to her step, the absence of which she had been so persistent in attributing to the "child's disordered liver."

Yes, Baldy's Point had been reveling in excitements, and its appetite grew with what it fed upon. That clearing up of the mystery about Cap Van Dorn, too, had touched their consciences, and a great many of them made solemn resolutions never again to judge a man by appearances. The story of Nellie Hall once out, Baldy's Point was amiably inclined to make a sort of hero out of Cap; but he received their apologetic advances much as he had accepted their adverse criticism: shrugged his broad shoulders, laughed a trifle bitterly at their laudatory remarks, and went on about his own affairs, unheeding, uncaring, only rejoicing that Nellie had at last found a tender woman-heart to nestle in.

Whenever Henry White made grateful allusion to the night when Cap made a sort of decoy of himself in his coat and hat, Van Dorn would smile inscrutably. To his way of thinking, the whole thing had led up to a delightful alteration in Briarwood affairs.

When he went to Locust Grove to relieve Amy of her charge, he found Nellie in a state of mutiny. Her attachment to her new friends

was as violent as it was sudden. With all the unreason of her disordered mind, she refused to go with him.

The Major settled the difficulty in his usual domincering fashion: "Let her stay. I like to have the gentle little thing here. She interests me."

"It should be entirely as Miss Wilson said," Cap had answered, looking wistfully from the dictatorial old soldier, strong in his helplessness, to Amy, where she stood passing a caressing hand soothingly over Nellie's shining hair.

And when Amy had said she really thought he had better leave her where she was, at least until she was well of the bad cough that had come as a sequel to that stolen expedition after blackberries in the dewy morning hours, he had consented without a demurrer.

So the gates of Paradise had swung partially ajar for Cap, and he was at liberty to come and go just when he pleased, with Nellie's name for his passport. And Amy and the Major discussed asylums and institutions with him, so that when the crop should be shipped, and he should have a little money, he would know just where to take her.

And as it was meet and proper that Briarwood should yield of her increase to the household that was sharing this grave responsibility

with him, he resolved himself into an amateur marketman, rarely coming over without his bags of vegetables or baskets of fruits.

But one morning he came without any offerings. His face was clouded with a new anxiety, and he asked to see Amy alone. His horse's heaving flanks told the story of his hard riding.

"I've got a strange letter here," he said, going into his subject without preamble, "and as I'm afraid it will take me to New Orleans, and perhaps to Kentucky, before I get back, I've come to ask you, if Nellie should need anything, will you call on Sellers for it? I'll make it right when I go through town."

"No more trouble, I hope? Nothing very serious?"

She was always gentle and patient and courteous. She was that to everybody; but he craved something more, and he craved it especially that morning.

"Yes," he said, gravely, "something very serious, I apprehend. I knew, as soon as I took hold of my business after the war, that some fellow in New Orleans had bought up all the mortgages on my place, and that he was inclined to give me trouble. But I did not know until to-day that malice was at the bottom of it."

"Malice?"

"Yes. At least unless there's a remarkable coincidence underneath it. This letter"—he felt in his pocket for it—"is from a lawyer in New Orleans, who informs me that he has been notified of the sudden death of a client of his, by name Hall, who holds a first mortgage on my place, and that his client wrote from his death-bed desiring foreclosure and an adjustment of his estate for the benefit of his only child—a daughter."

"And you think—" said Amy, exchanging her vaguely polite interest for an attitude of eager attention.

"That this man Hall is Nellie's father. If it is, I know he's left things in as bad a fix as possible for me. I've nothing to hope for in the way of time."

"But Hall is such a common name."

"True. But he says, here, this man died in Kentucky, where he had gone for his daughter."

"And what would the foreclosure of the mortgage mean for you?"

"Ruin. Absolute and utter ruin."

"Oh, no, don't say that! Think how young, how strong, how—"

She merely hesitated for a word that shouldn't sound too patronizing, but when she saw the great light of hope dawning in his fine eyes, she flushed and hesitated still longer. She had

known for a great while all that was in his foolish, fond heart. She finished her sentence with cool reserve:

"Your friends say that you have shown indomitable resolution in the past. Hold fast by it for the future, and all will be well."

"All will be well!"

He echoed her words almost hungrily, and then he rushed on to meet his fate.

"I've always thought that a man showed a terrible amount of effrontery in asking a woman to share nothing with him, calmly taking it for granted that he could make up to her by pretty speeches for every deprivation his poverty entailed on her; but, on the other hand, I sometimes feel that I could get the upper hand of my bad luck yet, if only I had a goal to work up to. You see, I've never had a goal. I suppose I've worked harder than I would have done otherwise, because I owed it to Nellie to make her as comfortable as possible. But if it should turn out that this man Hall is her father, and that she owns Briarwood, there'll be plenty of her kin turning up to take care of the poor child. They wouldn't tire so quickly of an heiress. I suppose the right sort of a fellow would always do his best on abstract principles, but then I never claimed to be the right sort of a fellow, you know. If only now—"

He looked at her imploringly. She was not so unversed in the lore of the human heart as to misread that earnest look. She blushed to think how much of her own weakness this simple-hearted, brave fellow had penetrated in the past, and yet loved her. She sighed to think how persistently he refused to modify the pedestal he had erected for her occupancy when they were both years younger. She wished she could give him all that he wanted and that he deserved to have. It seemed so very recently that she had come to do him bare justice even. If there was nothing to woo him on, there was certainly nothing to repel him in her face. She seemed waiting for the completion of that disjointed sentence:

"If only now I had a goal."

Something came into her face, and, reflecting itself in his heart and voice, filled them with brave hope.

"If only you, Amy, whom I have loved ever since I can remember, it seems to me, would say, 'Do it for my sake,' what would I not undertake? It's the aimlessness of it all, you see, that crushes the energy out of a fellow. I couldn't work just to feed and clothe Cap Van Dorn. I don't think enough of him for it, you see." He tried to point the humor of his words with a laugh, but it was a failure.

"I am so much weaker and more foolish than I can ever hope to make you understand," she said, with unshed tears making her eyes starry bright; "if you only knew—"

"I do know," said Cap, in a voice of solemn tenderness. "I know that I am not your heart's first choice, but all I ask is permission to win you into oblivion of every sorrow that has brooded over this dear head. Will you let me try, Amy? I don't want to bind you by any promises. When you come to me, it must be because you love me better than you do anybody else on earth. If that time ever comes, will you tell me of it voluntarily?"

And, standing up before him, with both her hands clasped tightly in his, she promised that she would. In a letter he wrote to her from New Orleans he took no advantage of the footing he had gained. It was all about Nellie; at least almost all.

"It seems, you know," he wrote, "that Nemesis had been working for the child whose life I marred. It is as I supposed. That man Hall was her father. He went to England during the war, and had just come back. He had left the Briarwood matters in shape to put the screws on as soon as my crop was ready for marketing. Nellie is an heiress. And now I shant have to look about for a 'reasonable'

asylum; she can be lodged like a princess, poor dear, and fare sumptuously every day. Do you know, I've got a foolish sort of a feeling as if there was some sort of atonement in submitting to be made poor that she should be enriched? I'm hanging on here to see if her executors will rent the place to me for next year. I'm sure she couldn't have a tenant who would look out for her interests more keenly. You believe that, don't you?"

The rest of his letter concerned her alone. We have nothing to do with it. She answered him, but her letter concerned Nellie exclusively: "I hope you won't be away much longer," it said; "we have had a terrible fright about Nellie. I am afraid that wetting she got has done her more serious harm than we can yet see. Her cough grows worse every day, and last night she had a slight hemorrhage which necessitates our keeping her very still. Father sits by her bedside, showing her pictures and telling her stories all day long. I love to see them together. They both seem so happy."

He tarried no longer than was absolutely necessary. It was to the Wilson place that he rode straight from the steamboat landing.

"I've found a splendid asylum for Nellie," were almost the first words he said when Amy came out to meet him on the front gallery.

She did not loose her hold of his hand, but drew him gently with her as she turned toward the room where Nellie lay fever-stricken and wasted.

"She has chosen her own asylum," she said, pausing before opening the door to the sick-room, "and you must be prepared for a great change."

"Not dead?"

"No, but very, very ill."

Yes, very, very ill. She turned her large eyes slowly toward the door when it opened, and a seraphic smile played upon her lips as she recognized the two dearest faces on earth to her. Cap kneeled down by her bedside, and, clasping her two wasted little hands in his, said, in a broken voice:

"Little Nellie, before you go away I want you to say something for Cap; say it after me, little girl, won't you?"

She smiled her assent, and, watching his trembling lips, repeated docilely the words he doled out tremulously, a single one at a time: "Cap—I—forgive—you—everything."

"I'm going to see mamma," she added brightly. "Amy says so. Amy says the flowers bloom there always. I love the flowers."

Her restless little hand, in its feverish wanderings over the bed-spread, rested on Queenie's

flaxen curls. She gathered this faithful companion of her darkened days in a tender embrace: "May I take Queenie to where the flowers bloom? Say, Cap"—her gentle voice grew querulous; she was impatient of the tears that kept him mute—"may I take Queenie to show her to mamma?"

A sobbing "yes" satisfied her. Poor little Nellie, she'd never been exacting, and she closed her eyes as if tired of such an unusual effort. Only for a second. Presently she opened them again, and turned them wistfully on the loving faces about her bed. They were all there; Amy kneeling on one side of her and Cap on the other, the Major quietly sobbing just out of her line of vision, and Mammy kneeling in prayer for the passing soul.

"Cap," she called to him shrilly, as if he were at a great distance, "I don't want to take Queenie; she's heavy, and I'm so tired. I want to pick flowers along the road. You may have Queenie. You may have all my things—everything I've got. You may have all my things that I love, Cap—my Mammy, and Queenie—and—Amy. I'm going to where the flowers—" Her eyes closed. Her breath was spent. She had gone to where the flowers bloom always. She had made her bequests and chosen her asylum.

Across her pulseless form Cap looked into Amy's eyes. Would she ratify Nellie's bequest? Voluntarily she placed her hand in his as they knelt there, the one on either side of the child they had sheltered together. Nellie's sweet lips seemed to wreath themselves into a smiling benediction, wafted from the spirit world, and Cap Van Dorn had found his goal.

THE END.



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